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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[4 February 2022]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.



## **Reimagining a way forward in digital learning that offers safe access to quality and equitable education for women and girls**

Before COVID-19, safe access to quality education was grossly unbalanced. Financing gaps were vast, and education was not adequately preparing girls and women with the skills needed to compete in today's world.

With the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, government and education leaders were forced to quickly deploy immense efforts to ensure the continuity of learning quickly. As the pandemic raged on in 2020, 2021, and now in 2022, education systems and distance learning have been forever transformed. The prolonged challenge of reopening schools safely, addressing learning losses, training teachers for effective digital teaching, and managing hybrid environments is the new reality.

Recalling its 45th Human Rights Council (HRC45) written statement (August 2020) in which Graduate Women International (GWI) stressed that the COVID-19 compulsory social distancing was creating more dependency on technology and digital platforms.[1] GWI repeats that increased dependence on digital technology and hybrid learning affects women and girls predominantly, putting them at higher risk of dropping out, of losing their fundamental human right to education and of jeopardizing their present and future academic and professional opportunities. [2]

Further recalling the "One year into COVID-19 education disruption: Where do we stand?" (UNESCO March 2021) report stated that approximately half of the world's population (some 3.6 billion people) still lacked an internet connection; meaning that at least 463 million or nearly one-third of students around the globe cannot access remote learning, mainly due to a lack of online learning policies or lack of equipment needed to connect from home. Most students do not have the appropriate connectivity, device, and digital skills required to find and use educational content dependent on technology.

To this point, GWI reminds us that the world is currently witnessing large-scale efforts to implement the use of technology in support of distance learning with a commendable adaptation capacity of educators globally. The advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) makes education more flexible and accessible, allowing disenfranchised populations to cross the systemic barriers they face to access quality lifelong education.[3]

However, without access to the right technology, millions of learners worldwide, especially women and girls, will be unjustly prevented from the educational opportunities offered by distance learning. In a world where almost half of the population does not have access to the Internet,[4] the pandemic has revealed first-hand the limitations of such disparity. Reliable and inexpensive connectivity is required, especially in remote places if digital learning is to thrive.

Noting the United Nations, Scaling-Up Digital Learning and Skills to Accelerate Progress Towards SDG4 report, and upholding that digital learning and skills training requires a targeted approach, GWI commends E9 Member States (six, Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Mexico, Nigeria, and Pakistan being GWI national affiliates) for their long-standing history of partnership and collaboration that offer a catalyst to accelerate progress on digital learning and skills training. GWI calls on Member States to take note of the E9 partnership as a best practice and encourage similar partnerships as targeted by SDG17.

The E9 Member States:

1. Are among the world's most populous (4.1 of 7.9 billion) [5] with large youth populations (6 billion by 2030) and with a high potential demographic dividend in low and low middle income countries.
2. Retain education systems representing 51.6% of all learners of the world at all levels. [6]
3. Have an established history of ICT cooperation through the E9 partnership.[7]

4. Operate a multilateral enabling ecosystem with potential to engage in a renewed social compact in support of digital learning, skilling, and livelihoods.[8]
5. Most learners in the nine countries still face disruption to learning either fully or partially and 11.3 million are at risk of not returning to education institutions.[9]

How these countries manage the transition phase to recovery, build resilience and reimagine education is crucial for global progress and development.

Recalling its HRC45 session written statement, GWI stresses the need for governments to replicate noteworthy good practices and ensure that e-learning will not broaden existing digital inequalities and urges them to participate in reducing such imbalances by ensuring equal access to digital tools and skills.

To this end, and as the demand for digital skills grows exponentially, governments must put into place infrastructure for training across all sectors and all levels of education. Hence, GWI insists on the crucial importance of SDG17 on the power of partnerships: governments must partner with telecom industries to develop development plans. There is a critical need for closer collaboration between Ministries of Education, education institutions, Ministries responsible for energy and connectivity, and digital industries to ensure the sustainability of the distance learning system.

The provision of decent learning conditions must include vital follow-up of all students learning remotely. In this sense, GWI states that distance learning should not entirely replace face-to-face lessons, as women and girls are at higher risk of dropping out. School attendance builds identity and strengthens essential social skills, which are at the core of integration in societies. Social exchanges shape critical minds, which is essential to empowering all individuals.

Educators are vital figures and critical stakeholders in students' empowerment. GWI warns against educators being left behind in the attempt to digitalise education too fast. The solution is a blended and flexible approach, combining online and remote resources with classroom training.

Further recalling the importance of its HRC45 session written statement, and considering the urgent need to include women's and girls' higher education as a critical stake in response to the current crisis and in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, GWI repeats its appeal and asks the 49th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council to urge Member States to:

1. Partner with telecom companies and invest in expanding the Internet network to extend coverage and broadband quality of public Wi-Fi and allow free access in all cities and municipalities and reliable connectivity in remote areas.
2. Invest in infrastructure for training staff and students, especially women and girls, to use IT services and digital devices.
3. Partner with higher education institutions to enquire about the possibility for students to follow online classes in decent conditions and safe and secure environments (access to the Internet, to a personal computer, information about the working environment).
4. Dedicate funding to ensure decent learning conditions for all students displaced from their education, especially for women and girls. Develop specific supports for educators to enhance their digital instruction skills.[10]
5. Partner with private and public sectors to provide the necessary material (computer, digital devices) to those who cannot afford it.
6. Ensure e-learning is augmented with digital face-to-face meetings as social exchange and coursework follow-up.
7. Encourage women and girls to seize the opportunity of e-learning to undertake higher- level education and training.

8. Provide a program of subsidies or bonuses to those in situations of economic difficulty for the acquisition of devices with an Internet connection.
9. Ensure that all asylum seekers in reception centres have Internet access and the appropriate devices to achieve this.
10. Optimize use of radio and public television as platforms for delivery of education.
11. Improve access to electricity in all areas rural and urban.

As a century-old organisation committed to advancing women and girls through lifelong education up to the highest levels, GWI sees the promising possibilities of distance learning as a means towards equal, safe, and inclusive access to education for all and especially critical for women and girls. At the same time, however, GWI urges for the implementation of safe access to distance learning that is equitable for all people.

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[1] Graduate Women International, Human Rights Council 45th session written statement, page 1.

[2] Graduate Women International, Human Rights Council 45th session written statement, page 1.

[3] Alex Twinomugisha, “The promise and the challenges of virtual schools”, World Bank Blogs, 4 October 2019.

[4] “ICTs to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals”, ITU Plenipotentiary Conference 2018 website.

[5] Calculated from United Nations Population Division (UNPD) – World Population Prospects 2019 Database

[6] UNESCO, Scaling up digital learning and skills in the world’s most populous countries to drive education recovery. <https://en.unesco.org/news/scaling-digital-learning-and-skills-worlds-most-populous-countries-drive-education-recovery>

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] <https://elearningindustry.com/distance-learning-pedagogy-developing-countries/amp>