

WOMEN GRADUATES–USA

WG-USA is the USA affiliate of Graduate Women International

Resolution

Issue/Resolution Title: Technology and Distance Learning – Equity in Education and Advanced Training for Women and Girls

Resolution Number: 2020

Resolution Text:

Women Graduates-USA Resolves to support national and global equity in education and advanced training by promoting equal access to digital technology and distance learning for women and girls.

Supporting Statement:

The world faces a looming education crisis that threatens to reverse decades of progress in expanding learning opportunities. Worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic is forcing unprecedented school shutdowns blocking some 1.6 billion learners at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels from the classroom. Compulsory social distancing due to COVID-19 creates more dependency on technology generally and forces the rapid adaptation of education methods to digital platforms. COVID-19 school shutdowns are affecting women and girls particularly, putting them at a higher risk of dropping out, of losing their fundamental human right to education, and of jeopardizing their present and future academic and professional opportunities. Through SDG 4 – (accelerating action through digital technologies: strengthening digital skills and capacities for human wellbeing) the UN declared access to the internet as a Human Right. Still, as of 2020, 3.6 billion people are still totally offline as more than 40% of the world population does not have internet access.

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned a spotlight on the digital disparities that already exist in society, namely that digital access is lowest for the least privileged. With nationwide school closures in 191 countries and almost half of the world population without access to the internet, women and girls in particular are in danger of being further marginalized by their lack of access to technology. The ongoing pandemic has exposed the vast discrepancy in home e-learning environments between men and women. Women and girls studying remotely are more likely than men and boys to spend time on housework and caregiving, preventing them from solely concentrating on studies. We are at risk of losing 20 years of progress in education for girls – pregnancies and early child marriage will increase, and many of them will not return

to school. The gender divide, with women and girls enjoying less access to information technology than men and boys, is true of rich and poor countries alike. Economic, social and cultural obstacles prevent or limit women's access to, use of, and benefits from ICT (information and communications technology). Although geographical isolation and poor technological infrastructures can affect both men and women, the physical inaccessibility is exacerbated by power inequalities and socio-cultural norms.

Distance learning strategies are essential during and after COVID-19. A recent Brookings report shows that 90% of high-income countries are using remote learning strategies to continue education. In contrast, only 25% of low-income countries are doing so, and then largely through television and radio that do not allow for interaction with teachers and peers. Distance learning has promising possibilities towards equal, safe, and inclusive access to education for all, but only if women and girls have access to the right technology. Giving women and girls not only access to digital resources, but also the knowledge, training, and confidence to design and use them, will ensure that they are not further marginalized in an increasingly digital world post-pandemic.

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. If digital learning is to thrive, reliable and inexpensive internet connectivity to the internet is required, especially in remote places. In the United States, a vast income, race, and geographical divide exists. Between 15 and 16 million U.S. students out of 50 million live in a household that lacks internet access, a digital device, or both. The states with the lowest proportion of adequately connected students are concentrated in the southern and western parts of the United States in Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. Those states have a high concentration of rural areas or tribal lands, which generally struggle for broadband access. All 50 states, though, have a substantial percentage of residents who are not adequately connected for remote learning. It is painfully clear that a disproportionate share of those who lack access to a reliable internet connection and devices are Black, Hispanic, and Native American, live in rural areas, or come from low-income households. Nationally, less than one in three school districts include the distribution of mobile broadband hotspots as part of a COVID-19 response plan. Urban districts (48.5%) were nearly twice as likely to include this distribution as rural and suburban districts (28.6% and 25.4%, respectively). That is just the United States. Globally, 29% or 346,000,000 young people aged 15 – 24 years are not online. Africa has the least connected student population (60%) compared to 4% in Europe. However, not all African countries are comparable – 85% of Mauritius has connected schools compared to 2% in Ethiopia. In poor urban areas in Africa men can outnumber women 2 to 1 in terms of internet use.

Building back better post-COVID -19 means finally closing the gap in the technological divide. Many online activities, such as job searches, creation of a curriculum, school education for children, or training courses for adults, need adequate tools to be carried out. As the demand for digital skills has grown exponentially, governments must put into place the infrastructure for training across all sectors and all levels of education.

Governments need to ensure that e-learning will not broaden existing digital inequalities and act to reduce such imbalances by ensuring equal access to digital tools and skills. Governments need to protect the progress made in girls' access to education with gender-responsive, evidence-based and context-specific actions.

The pandemic crisis is an opportunity to build back better, putting equity and inclusion at the center of all education policies.

Plan of Action:

1. Appeal to policy makers in underserved and underfunded pilot areas at state and national levels to rapidly invest billions of dollars toward closing the digital divide in the United States.
2. Assist school districts in the underfunded pilot areas making a plan for how they will expand technology access:
 - a. switching from hotspots to lower-cost broadband options
 - b. scaling up the supply of digital services
3. Encourage education groups to work together to find ways for districts to share resources and help improve their communities' infrastructure by using collective power
4. Investigate the structural inequalities used to fund schools that perpetuate disparities .
5. Track and advocate for or against legislation relevant to education funding regarding distance learning and internet access.
6. Study ways to develop more open and flexible education systems for the future and share best practices with school districts and educators.
7. Reach out to corporations and individuals who have historically supported and financed under-served, public-school educational outreach efforts and share these finding with GWI and NFAs.
8. Develop partnerships and outreach with the following organizations:
 - a. EQUALS Global Partnership *
 - b. Connect 2020 **
 - c. Connect 2030 **

References and Resources

*EQUALS Global Partnership – A global partnership consisting of corporate leaders, governments, businesses, non-profit organizations, academic institutions, NGOs and community groups, working to bridge the gender divide and promote gender balance in the technology sector by championing equality of access and skills development for women and men alike

**Connect 2020 and Connect 2030 – The name of ITU's (International Telecommunications Union) agenda for global communication with the goal to bridge the digital divide and provide affordable broadband for all. ITU Enables and accelerates socially, economically and environmentally sustainable growth and development for all. ITU is the United Nations specialized agency for implementing projects under the UN development system

- Plan International – A development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and equality for girls
- CARE – An international humanitarian organization fighting global poverty and world hunger by working alongside women and girls
- ICRW – International Center for Research on Women – Website
- Brookings Education Report – “Scale Gender-Responsive Distance Education to Reach the Most Marginalized Girls”
- CARE USA – Website
- Save the Children Website
- UNICEF
- Stanford University School of Education – Linda Darling Hammond – “U.S. Educational System is One of the Most Inequal in the World”
- The Nation – August 24, 2020 – “Unfair Funding Programs”
- CAP – Center for American Progress
- Rutgers Graduate School of Education – “Education of Wealthy Children Funded at Double the Rate of Poor”
- Correspondence with The Honorable Eliot Engel, Chairman Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives – “Keeping Girls in School Act” (H.R. 2153)
- Alliance for Quality Education, N.Y.
- Education Week – Digital Education
- CRPE – Center on Reinventing Public Education – “The Digital Divide Among Students During COVID-19: Who Has Access? Who Doesn't” Robin Lake and Alvin Makori
- ECOSOC – High Level Political Forum, July 7 – July 16, 2020 “Getting the SDGs Back on Track”
- UNESCO Website – “Education – From Disruption to Recovery”
- UNESCO – “Global Education Coalition #Learning Never Stops
- Plan International – “Response to the COVID-19 Crisis”

- Stefania Giannini – UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education – UNESCO Website
- LA Times – 8/13/2020 – “A Struggle Just to Start” – by Dania Maxwell
- MyNews LA – July 16, 2020 – “Online Learning Leaves Thousands of Black, Brown Students Behind”
- fwMAP – Feminist and Women’s Movement Action Plan – “Impact of COVID-19 on Education
- CITE – California IT in Education

Financial Impact: None

Proposed by Women Graduates-USA Education Working Group – Christine Heller and Louise McLeod



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