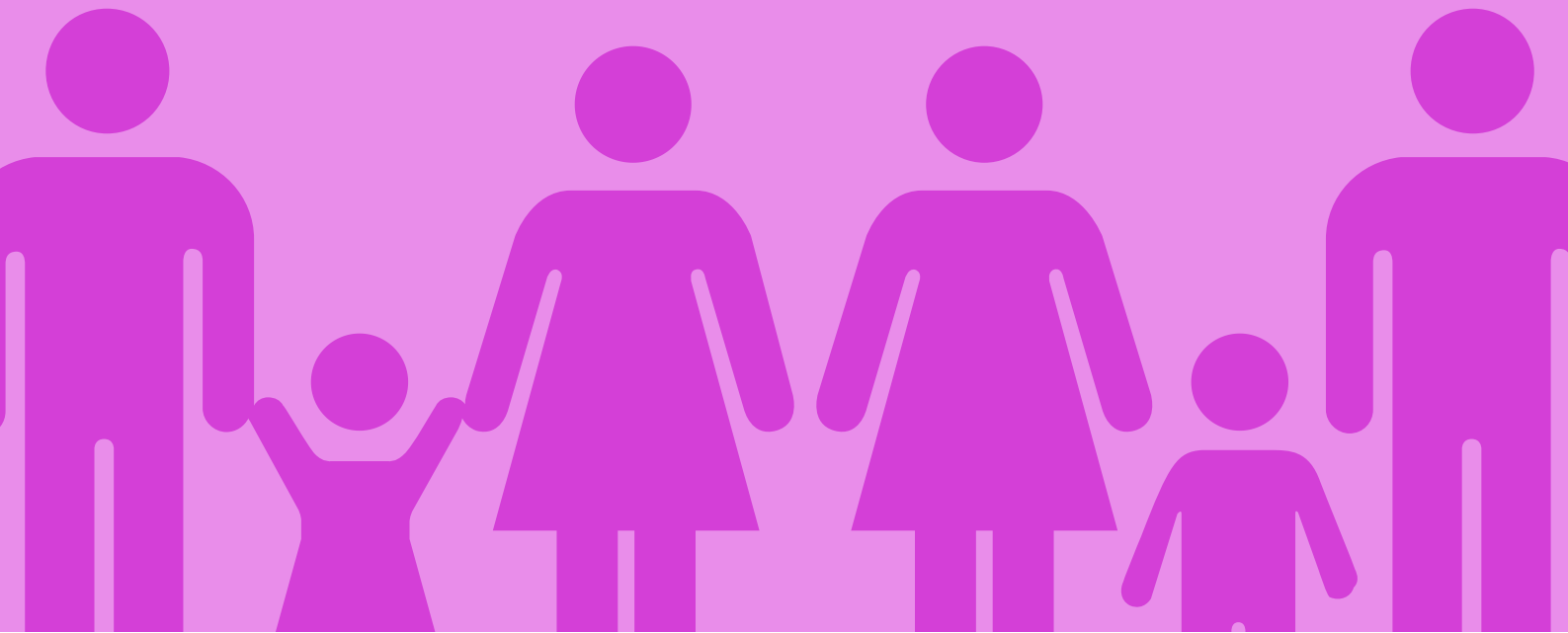# GLOBAL STUDENT REPORT

Aspirations for Young Women and Girls for Education in the Digital Age for CSW67

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Introduction

This report is the Global Student Forum's (GSF) response to the call for reports by youth and adolescents by the United Nations Women, for the 67th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67) with the priority theme: *Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.* It is written on behalf of the global student movement, representing hundreds of millions of students from the school and higher education movement, worldwide. It is written in partnership between the GSF and the various regional platforms for the student movement across the world, including the All-Africa Students' Union (AASU), the Commonwealth Students' Association (CSA), and the European Students' Union (ESU), with additional support from the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA) and the Kenyan organisation Women Students Mentorship Association (WOSMA). This report was also the result of a partnership between the GSF's two major clusters, Inclusive Education and Gender Justice Cluster, and Quality Education Cluster.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a severe disruption to the global education experience, resulting in the mass move to digital technologies. The widespread embrace of digital technologies to enhance teaching, learning and administration revealed the capacity of digital technologies to overcome inequalities caused by pandemic conditions. In addition, the pandemic revealed significant disparities in gender access to technological and digital resources. Online access and digital tools aided pandemic recovery and the sustaining of education during the global health crisis, but it also revealed significant gaps that continue to exist geographically, socially and economically, in terms of gender access to education. The reality of this outcome is a "knowledge gap" influencing the ability of young women and girls to gain access - not only to the use of digital tools - such as smartphones or laptops, but information in general. At the peak of the pandemic, 118.5 million girls were out of school while 11 million were at risk of dropping out (UNESCO, 2022). Such has been evidenced to contribute to threats to young women and girls in poorer nations, such as child marriage, human trafficking, modern slavery, gender-based violence or sexual abuse, and early pregnancies. Up to 1 million girls in sub-Saharan Africa are estimated to not be going back to school following the pandemic, due to early pregnancies (Witter, 2021).

With movements from female students across the world - in Afghanistan, in Iran, in India - calling for the freedom to access education, it is clear that something needs to change. The global student movement upholds gender justice for all, where gender expression is respected and acknowledged as an essential part of acknowledging our human rights and freedoms. This report seeks to demonstrate the values of the student movement given the current Priority Theme of CSW67, while also bringing attention to some of the activities that the

student movement are currently doing across the globe. We aim to bring attention to initiatives that support young women and girls, and gender diverse peoples such as advocacy initiatives, policy reforms, and grassroots movements.

Such initiatives are argued by research to improve young women and girls' mental health and wellbeing, from maternal health and fertility rates to protection against self-harm or violence. In the context of education, the global student movement upholds that education should champion gender justice and inclusion, as the foundation for equity to redress historic and social inequalities towards women and girls whether with technology and digital engagement, or in the classroom.

About

Global Student Forum (GSF)

The Global Student Forum is the global union of school and university students. As the umbrella organisation of the world's major representative, independent and democratic student unions, it defends the educational, cultural, economic and social interests of more than 200 million learners worldwide in the decision making spaces of the international community. Its multi-level democratic governance structure spanning from the local to the international level, ensures legitimate representation of constituency interests and accountability of the organisation's political leadership.

The Global Student Forum was founded in 2020 by the All-Africa Students Union (AASU), Commonwealth Students' Association (CSA), European Students' Union (ESU), Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU), Organización Continental Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Estudiantes (OCLAE), and many other national student organisations and movements. Through its membership it currently represents 202 student unions from 122 countries.

All-Africa Students' Union (AASU)

The All-Africa Students Union (AASU) is the umbrella organization for all African students from the basic level to higher learning institutions and a very dominant force on the African continent and beyond. With over 75 Member Unions across the continent, AASU represents over 170 million students in Africa and the diaspora. Since its inception in 1972, AASU now has a presence in 54 countries in Africa. The Union played an important role in the struggle against colonialism in Africa and the ending of apartheid in South Africa.

Today, AASU is at the forefront of the fights for equal access to quality education, quality assurance in higher education, harmonization of higher education systems – with key emphasis on the mobility of academics and comparability of qualifications, democratic governance, defending students' rights, promotion of gender equality and African culture, sustainable development, entrepreneurship, fostering of academic

freedom, freedom of research and autonomy of higher institutions of learning, and the promotion of peace and democratic values, and other noteworthy objectives. AASU's core activities are focused on a broad range of issues that affect students, including but not limited to the 7 Strategic Priorities of the Union - Education & Students Rights, Capacity Building, Gender Advocacy, Environment & Climate Action, Pan-Africanism & African Culture, Migration & Mobility, Democracy & Good Governance.

Commonwealth Students' Association (CSA)

The Commonwealth Students' Association (CSA) is the coalescence of the student organizations within the Commonwealth. Established in 2012 at the 18th Conference of the Commonwealth Education ministers in Mauritius, its role is to be an independent advocate of students throughout the Commonwealth, which brings students' concerns to the forefront of educational development.

The CSA works to see a world where students across the commonwealth are empowered to effect change in education and contribute to their societies; students are engaged as valuable partners in effecting the change that they seek in education; and where students have a credible and representative voice in education. Upholding the values of the Commonwealth, the CSA unites, represents and builds the capacities of students, providing them with opportunities across the Commonwealth to address issues

within fields of education and global development.

European Students' Union (ESU)

The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation for 45 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 40 countries. ESU represents almost 20 million students across Europe through its members.

The European Students' Union's aim is to represent and promote students' educational, social, economic, and cultural interests at the European level to all relevant bodies, such as the European Union, the Bologna Follow-Up Group, the Council of Europe, and UNESCO.

ESU promotes a higher education system based on the values of quality, equity and accessibility for all.

Organización Continental Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Estudiantes (OCLAE)

The Latin American and Caribbean Continental Organization of Students (OCLAE) represents 32 student federations in the region, including organizations of the secondary, university and postgraduate student movement from 24 countries of the American Continent, representing more than 100 million students.

Among its main work objectives are: to fight for the eradication of illiteracy, the affordability of education, student welfare and equality with greater coverage of education; the defense of university

autonomy, co-government in student centers, freedom and plurality of the academy and free public education; to fight against any kind of discrimination and to promote gender justice; promote and develop the effective solidarity of students in their fight against fascism, imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, hunger, social injustice and any conduct or manifestation that harms human dignity and for Latin American unity and integration.

Barriers to Women and Girls' Education

Education is a fundamental human right. Ensuring that all individuals have access to education, regardless of gender, is essential for the achievement of other human rights and for the development of a just and equitable society. The right to education is crucial for women and girls to gain the skills, knowledge and self-confidence needed to pursue their goals and participate in society without or at least with less discrimination or oppression.

Gender justice is especially essential for the empowerment of women and girls in education. Transformed education creates ground for reflection of the inequalities of current systems, increases the ability to make informed decisions about health and well-being, and reduces vulnerability to violence and exploitation. Gender justice education is important in challenging and changing societal norms and stereotypes that perpetuate gender inequality, and can address many dimensions within a student's educational experience. This could include a school not meeting the health and safety or hygiene standards that are needed for children in general, or lack of provisions for female-based issues such as menstruation or being a young mother due to stigma. It can be the exclusion from certain educational topics due to the belief that women and girls should work in the household, with girls spending 40% more time doing unpaid chores than boys. In places such as Burkina Faso, Yemen and Somalia, girls from ages 10-14 years old do more chores than boys, with Somalian girls approximated to do 26 hours of chores a week.

Thus an inclusive education system requires transforming social and gender norms to achieve gender equality. Within these gender norms contains social belief systems regarding marriage and relationships, child bearing, social organisation, employment, and even sexuality. These gender norms in addition to the resourcing issues identified above, contribute to the 129 million girls who are out of school globally (UNICEF, 2023). In countries with conflicts, girls are twice as likely to not be in school than girls in peaceful countries (UNICEF, 2023). Even in higher education, women face significant issues of discrimination, less likely to be in

a leadership position in academia than a man with two-fifths of senior academics - professors, deans, chairs and senior university leaders - being male, and less than a third of those completing research articles being women (UNESCO, 2022). The desired outcome from gender transformative norms should include key strategies and actions on effective collaboration between organizations, agencies, professionals and networks to increase and strengthen advocacy on girls rights and mobility of resources towards gender transformative norms and women and girls empowerment initiatives.

Gender transformative approaches should be used to empower girls to exercise their own rights in all aspects of programming, documentation and implementation of projects and programmes targeting their interests. There needs to be an emphasis on engaging with all stakeholders in increasing voices of girls in research, advocacy, programme design, monitoring and evaluation, so as to amplify the voices of girls and document to ensure the lived experiences of girls are integrated into consortium advocacy campaigns. Advocacy is required for gender synchronized programming, that addresses the complexity of layers of discrimination and oppression (gender, race, class, disability, identity etc) faced by girls and women, including creating safe spaces where gender challenges can be discussed transparently.

Women and Girls During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the past 25 years, 180 million more girls are in primary and secondary school since the Beijing Declaration was implemented in 1995 (GEM, 2021). When the pandemic occurred, it revealed that the situation for women and girls in education is complex and varies from country to country, and in rural and urban areas. However, overall, it can be said that the pandemic has negatively impacted education for women and girls, with many being unable to attend school and university due to closures and increased care work and domestic responsibilities put on them. Two-thirds of low- and lower-middle income countries cut their education budgets when the pandemic began, largely impacting young women and girls (UNESCO, 2021). Many girls dropped out of education due to school closures and pressures to work or due to lack of access to technological hardware, with more than 20 million at risk of dropping out during the end of the pandemic period (Pfuyne &

Ademola-Popoola, 2021). Girls in low-income households and rural areas were at risk in particular, struggling to find resourcing for education and often required to work to survive.

For those who had access to continue their education online, the curriculum still failed to provide sufficient gender equality. Gender justice and inclusive pedagogies still remain sparse within education, which is still taught in consumerism, patriarchal and Western modes of engagement. Existing inequalities such as not being able to purchase school supplies were

exacerbated by the demand for use of digital technologies. Many young women and girls suffered from homelessness or precarious housing scenarios, inability to access good food and water, poor healthcare provisions, and educational support, in addition to engaging in education itself.

Digital Education & Female Empowerment

Digital Accessibility and the Gender Gap

The global student movement acknowledges that digital accessibility and the gender gap in technology are important issues that need to be acknowledged and adequately funded in order to create a more inclusive, sustainable and equitable society. Girls and women often have less access to digital tools than men and boys. Societal stereotypes concerning the role of women and girls concerning the household, means that many young women and girls do not own digital tools or may fear use of them due to discrimination, in poorer communities (Learning Plan, 2022). Globally, females have less access to the

internet in developing nations. In regions like Africa, this is attributed to being due to low mobile phone ownership among women; similarly in South East Asia, women are 26% times more likely to not own a mobile phone than a man (Learning Plan, 2022).

During the period of the pandemic, developed nations were also found to have a significant gender divide in digital accessibility.

The effects of the pandemic and the poor education management of different countries all over the world showed a potential impact on delivery of quality education, decreasing the decades of efforts to build accessibility and equality of opportunities in education, especially digital teaching and learning platforms during the pandemic. While 87% of developed nations were online, student unions were found to be having to aid many students through hardship grants and supplementary training to aid their access to internet, hardware, and upskilling in their use of digital tools during the pandemic period (UN DESA, 2021). This digital divide between the Global North and the Global South is a concern. In the Global South, access to digital technology is limited by factors such as lack of infrastructure, cost and digital literacy unlike the Global North that has access to the likes of computers or smartphones, which are integrated in most citizens daily lives. The digital divide between the south and north has very significant problems in education, access to information and economic development. There need to be more initiatives being brought to the global

south especially in regards to digital education, like more e-learning courses, building better internet infrastructure in remote areas and constantly offering digital literacy training and online skills to women and girls.

While the pandemic and successive lockdowns contributed to a rapid digital transformation, this transforming digital world has been advocated by students to exist for many years. Students recognise that digital skills are necessary these days to support their employment and life needs. Over 90% of jobs are now acknowledged to contain a digital component, meaning that women and girls, minority peoples, low socio-economic individuals and many other vulnerable groups, are in danger of not having access to the opportunities that should be available to them. This undermines the development of nations which need to prioritise the gender technology gap, due to its impact on economic growth and development, not to mention women and girls' sense of wellbeing (UN DESA, 2021).

For students this means creating an education system that is well financed by governments and relevant intergovernmental bodies to uphold gender equality. Student unions call for an increase in the representation of women and people from minorities - such as those with disabilities, from rural areas, from indigenous communities, refugees and minorities, LGBTQIA+ and other vulnerable groups - to ensure that digital technologies are designed with inclusivity in mind. Open Research and Open Science has allowed for more women and girls to engage with

free and democratically accessible research across the world, rather than upholding a commercialist, privatised model of knowledge sharing. Specified funding is required in the form of scholarships, stipends and paid internships for women in STEM subjects, ICT and e-Commerce. This needs to combat the inequalities that only 30% of tech science and technology professionals are women, suggests a need for school curricula to also be supported to encourage female leadership in science and technological studies from a young age (UN, 2022). The global student movement proposes in these ways the gender gap in technology can only be closed, especially if we have mentors and strong examples of women in STEM careers and education in tech, to inspire and empower women and girls to be tech savvy and pursue digital leadership positions.

Digital and Technological Safety

Given the range of gender-based human rights concerns highlighted by the student movement in the previous section of this report, it is important for us to collectively stress the need to prioritise digital safety and ethical practice. Social media is a place where self-expression can be positive, but can also lead to online harassment, hacking, cyberbullying and other toxic behaviour. One in five young women on UK social media have been "cyber-flashed", while online sexual exploitation and abuse can occur in the form of online grooming, live-streamed abuse, online sexual coercion and extortion, online sex trafficking, and image-based abuse (Duffield, 2022; Equality Now, 2021).

Cyberbullying, which includes posting harmful, negative, false or unkind content about others online, contributing to mental health illnesses among young women, such as anorexia and bulimia, self-harm, drug use and other issues (UNICEF, 2022). Young people can also be targeted to pay scammers or exploitative online systems on gaming websites or as add-on applications, due to lack of experience in the digital world. They have also been the targets of political misinformation, and right-wing chat groups that can contribute to extreme violence and radicalisation, and the objectification of women that can contribute to gender-based violence, hate crime, and even femicide.

Digital safety also includes conversations with young women and girls that biometrics and biodata are now being collected in leisure and education environments online. The rise of digital student identification cards, online invigilation or proctoring, e-writing tools, artificial intelligence educational tools, anti-cheating technologies, online lecture recordings, and various other technologies, data is collected which can include and is not exclusive to, iris patterns, fingerprints, behavioural tracking, skin colour, age, noise in one's study environment, writing styles, time of engagement in education, and other areas, importantly gender. Such data contributes to our data footprint, a permanent record of all actions on the internet in internal systems, servers, and cloud services. Such can be used - and has been used - with large corporations having created applications that can target young women and girls, such as including voice messaging systems with strangers that

may be misunderstood, or covertly recording a child's conversation in gaming applications.

Consequently, digital safety conversations among young women should be funded and supported by governments, intergovernmental groups, education institutions, and civil society organisations. Capacity building is needed to provide groups of young women and girls with safe spaces to help them understand their rights online and ways of reporting such issues. Methods that the student movement have engaged with to create safe digital environments include organising master classes with experts to train students on how to protect their mental health and digital profile. Digital safety requires constant attention as new threats and vulnerabilities keep resurfacing. It is essential that we have a safe community providing women and girls with the knowledge to succeed.

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Student Digital Initiatives Upholding Empowerment for Women and Girls

Global Student Forum (GSF)

The GSF has engaged with students across the world to uphold the rights of young women and girls. The GSF has focused on the development of female student leadership through initiatives such as the Feminist Solidarity Circle. The Circle brings together feminist voices from across the world to discuss topics of relevance to young women and girls, including digital education. Other initiatives include partnering with the 100 Million Campaign to denounce modern slavery and child marriage in Africa and Asia, in a series of events such as their "Justice for Africa's Children" series run by Kailash Satyarthi and the Nobel Laureates and Leaders for Children.

From a student rights perspective, several campaigns have been run to use social media to raise awareness of authoritarian and exclusion of women and girls in education. The "Say Their Names" and "See Their Faces" online campaigns sought to raise awareness of students who were missing or killed in the protests led by young women and girls following the death of Marsa Amini in Iran. An event followed shortly organised with French-Iranian feminists, focusing on the need to emancipate young women and girls. Statements have also been made about the physical and digital exclusion of young women and girls from education under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, including having young women from there openly speak at the Asia-Pacific Release of the Youth GEM Report on their experiences.

The GSF's female leaders have contributed to digital discussions with the UN, UNESCO, OSGEY and other stakeholders concerning the Transforming Education Summit, Global Education Monitoring Report, and the Global Digital Compact, in addition to microcredentials, Open Research, and other areas relevant to the digital needs of women and girls.

All-Africa Students' Union (AASU)

The All-Africa Students Union (AASU) has made significant contributions to the theme of innovation and technological change in education in the digital age, with a focus on achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. In the past years, the AASU has commemorated the

Girls in ICT Day project, which aimed to bridge the gender gap in the technology sector by raising awareness and providing skills and resources to girls. This year, the AASU has introduced the Girls in STEM and Digital Inclusion project, which expands the focus to all STEM fields and digital inclusion. The project builds on the previous years' Girls in ICT Day project and aims to provide girls with the necessary skills and resources to succeed in STEM fields and access to digital tools, as well as to raise awareness of the importance of gender equality in these fields.

The AASU's efforts have led to an increase in the number of girls participating in STEM-related activities and programs, as well as a greater awareness of the importance of gender equality in the STEM sector and digital inclusion. The AASU's work has also contributed to the development of policies and programs that promote the inclusion of girls in the digital economy and STEM fields, such as the development of ICT and STEM education programs for girls and the creation of mentorship and internship opportunities for young women in the technology and STEM sectors.

Overall, the AASU's contributions to the theme of innovation and technological change in education in the digital age have been instrumental in promoting gender equality and empowering all women and girls, not only in the field of technology but also in STEM and Digital Inclusion. The commemoration of Girls in ICT Day project, Girls in STEM and Digital Inclusion project, along with the gender advocacy group's

initiatives, have helped in bridging the gap between girls and technology, and making sure they can access the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

European Students' Union (ESU)

ESU works for gender equality and empowerment for women in multiple ways. Internally and organisationally we have a Gender Mainstreaming Strategy to reach our goals. ESU have quotas within our structures to ensure gender disparity. All of their work aims to have an intersectional approach and to further this they are currently creating an Equity plan. At their statutory events ESU have mandatory gender sessions for all, and specific meeting fora for people identifying as women to share their experiences, while simultaneously offering a space for allies to have similar reflections. To help combat period poverty and ensure equal access to our events free period products are available to participants. Several of them have campaigned and achieved access to free period products in their countries. ESU's unions have also fought for abortion rights and bodily autonomy in their national context.

The rights of women and marginalised groups are integrated into all our work. ESU are currently engaged in combating gender based violence in higher education. They support global human rights and their unions have scholarship programmes where women who are at risk of persecution can move to a safe country to complete their studies.

Organización Continental Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Estudiantes (OCLAE)

Commitment to fighting gender inequality is a core principle for OCLAE. The valorization of female leadership at the base of the student movement in each country is reflected in the large number of women who are student representatives and leaders and occupy different positions in the organisation's structure. To promote spaces for organizing and strengthening the feminist debate in the entity, contributing to the fight against gender inequality and all forms of oppression suffered within universities and in the student movement, the Women Students Encounter was created in 2005 and happens in Brazil every two years with the presence of international delegates representing various student unions of Latin America. The meeting promotes guidelines such as the legalization of abortion, the end of sexist hazing, the creation of day care centers at the university and the fight against the commodification of women's bodies and lives.

As a result of the guidelines that emerged from the encounter of 2021, a campaign for the distribution of chips or network packages with access to educational content and online classes for teachers and students was carried out by national unions, seeking to serve low-income students to ensure access to digital education during the suspension of in-person classes due to the pandemic. The campaign achieved its objective in numerous states, guaranteeing access to education for vulnerable students in countries over the region.

Pacific Region

In the Pacific Region, various initiatives are being implemented to support and empower young women and girls. Despite there being low levels of political representation for women across the region, various initiatives have sprung up at the grassroots and national level to manage the gender pay gap, gender digital divide, health concerns, and low levels of literacy, in addition to cultural discrimination and the inequality of women in general.

One of these examples is the Thursdays in Black (TiB) initiative that emerged from the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA). The movement that originated in the Anglican Church, stands against sexual violence, especially towards women and gender fluid people on and off university campuses. They have been involved in political coalitions, alliances and initiatives to create documents such as the Sexual Violence Prevention Action Plan, and large protests such as the 2021 #LetUsLive rally due to a huge increase in sexual assaults in the capital city. Most of these have been organised around social media campaigning, and calling out hate and trolling online.

Similarly, the National Union of Students Australia (NUS A) Women's Department has been actively involved in organising events to protect women's abortion rights following *Roe v Wade* in the United States with solidarity rallies across Australia.

Additional rallies and research projects have been conducted on sexual violence across Australia campuses, and into the treatment of Queer/LGBTQIA+ students. These have also included a social media dimension, focusing on outreach through online engagement. Period poverty campaigns have also been conducted by members of NUS Australia and NZUSA, pushing for students' associations to provide free period provisions to female students.

Recommendations

General Recommendations

1. Develop strong systems of accountability, justice and access to justice, that communicate the rights of women and girls, and enforce existing laws and enhance transparency and accountability of national justice systems. This should be done through advocating for legal reforms to reduce loopholes and contradictory texts within legal systems globally.

2. Enhancing access to and reach of existing mechanisms that support women and girls' rights, including education to improve their understanding of existing laws. This would include facilitating collaborations between the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education to ensure full implementation of return to school policy for teenage mothers as well as establishing programmes that reduce child pregnancies and child marriages.

3. Enhancing access to and quality of safe space programming, whereby communities are included in identifying and offering safe spaces.

4. Introduction of mobile health services.

5. Increasing SRHR decision making and bodily autonomy for adolescent girls and young women in educational institutions.

6. Remove legal and policy barriers to pregnant adolescents/adolescent mothers remaining in or returning to school. Routinely analyze retention of girls and adolescents who are married/in unions, pregnant or mothers.

7. Regularly monitor and periodically evaluate coverage and content of CSE delivered in formal and non-formal settings.

Priority Theme Recommendations

1. Include young women and girls and gender diverse students in educational governance, digital and technology development at the intergovernmental, governmental, and institutional level.

2. Provide effective financing for internet, hardware and upskilling courses for young women and girls to avoid technocratic social structures and inequality in the access to resources.

3. Support gender digital fluency in legislation, policies, and education processes, creating democratic knowledge-sharing platforms, peer-to-peer mentoring spaces, and support for building digital tools into curricula.

4. Provide student and educator-led think tanks to create safe and ethical environments for young women and girls, providing standards and guidelines for online engagement to uphold privacy, support and freedom from exploitation.

5. Take an holistic perspective when building a strong infrastructure to support the development of technological and digital tools in wider society, including making effective plans and incentives for women and girls engaging in STEM, ICT and e-Commerce subjects.

6. Manage gender equalities especially for women and girls in the Global South through identifying how donor funding models influences development with digital education, and the technologies that could increase equity for women and girls in poorer nations.

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GLOBAL
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