Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders

Organisation: Women 4 STEM Incorporated

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Country: Australia

Public or Confidential: Public

1. What motivates you to uphold, protect or promote human rights?

Women 4 STEM was founded in 2005 (originally Vic ICT for Women) with the clear mission of addressing the systemic barriers that prevent girls and women from entering, staying in, and leading within the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Our motivation comes from the recognition that STEM is not only about careers or industry, but about shaping every dimension of society, from the design of critical infrastructure to the algorithms that influence our daily lives. If women are excluded from these spaces, their rights to equal participation are denied, and our societies suffer from unsafe, inequitable, and biased innovations.

We approach our work through a human rights lens, ensuring that gender equality in STEM is understood as both a right and a necessity for inclusive civic life. Girls and women must have the right to:
- Access and thrive in STEM education at all stages of schooling.
- Enter STEM careers free from harassment, exclusion, or pay inequity.
- Contribute their expertise to leadership and decision-making roles in technology and innovation.

This rights-based approach informs every aspect of our work. We are motivated by the belief that women and girls should not only be participants in STEM but should also be visible leaders shaping a safer and fairer technological future.

Since 2005, Women 4 STEM has engaged over 29,000 participants, contributed 463,710 volunteer hours, and generated more than $1.2 million in direct program investment. Taken together, the collective impact of this work is valued at $20 million, representing one of the most sustained community-led contributions to STEM equity in Australia. This investment

spans the entire STEM pipeline, from inspiring schoolgirls through outreach, to mentoring early-career professionals, to supporting women's leadership and policy advocacy.

2. Do you believe your work contributes to a fairer, more just society?

Yes. A fair society requires that half the population is not systematically excluded from the very fields that shape our economies and civic futures. Our programs deliberately address barriers at each point of the pipeline:

- Education outreach: Our flagship program Go Girl, Go for IT is Australia's largest free, one-day STEM conference for schoolgirls. In 2025, it attracted over 1,800 students and teachers, connecting them with women role models in industry. The event dismantles stereotypes, builds confidence, and inspires girls to see themselves as future innovators.

- Retention and progression support: Programs such as Grad Girls and Mentor(SHE:) ensure women do not only enter the workforce but are retained and progress into leadership roles. In 2024, Grad Girls supported 174 young women in developing career pathways into STEM. Mentor(SHE:) paired 61 women with senior industry mentors, strengthening confidence and networks.

- Leadership and advocacy: We deliver programs such as What's Hot in Tech and the Work Well Respect Network. These initiatives help women not only understand emerging technologies but also address workplace gender-based violence and cultural barriers that prevent advancement. By linking workplace safety with gender equity, we treat STEM equality as a human rights issue as well as an occupational health and safety matter.

3a. If you live in a country where there is some space to engage in human rights work, how would society have developed differently if this work was not permitted?

Without the work of organisations like Women 4 STEM, inequities in the education system and workplace would remain unchallenged. Girls would continue to be underrepresented in subjects like physics, where women account for only 22% of Year 12 enrolments in Australia. Workplaces would remain unsafe for women who experience gender-based harassment, and leadership in technology would remain dominated by men.

The absence of our advocacy and programming would mean:
- Fewer girls seeing themselves as capable of pursuing STEM careers.

- A persistent pay gap where women in STEM earn on average $8,200 less per year than men.
- Technologies designed without women's perspectives, entrenching inequities in algorithms, AI systems, and workplace tools.

Our existence creates civic space for women to be heard, defended, and championed in areas where their voices were previously marginalised.

4. Describe the human rights work you are most proud of over the past five years.

We are proud of multiple areas of impact:

- Go Girl, Go for IT: Over its 20-year history, Go Girl has reached tens of thousands of schoolgirls. In 2025, it expanded virtually, ensuring rural and regional schools could participate. Teachers consistently report the program transforms girls' perspectives on what is possible for their futures.

- Grad Girls: Since its inception, Grad Girls has grown by 85%. In 2024, 174 participants were supported, with many transitioning into internships and graduate roles directly because of program linkages.

- Mentor(SHE:): This structured mentoring program has supported more than 1,000 women to date, with 61 active pairs in 2024 alone. Feedback shows participants not only gained confidence but also secured promotions and leadership roles.

- Work Well Respect Network: We worked with WorkSafe Victoria to treat workplace gender-based violence as a health and safety issue. This advocacy reframes discrimination and harassment as systemic risks requiring organisational accountability.

- What's Hot in Tech: With 272 participants in 2024, this program connects women with cutting-edge fields such as AI, cybersecurity, and robotics, building both technical confidence and literacy about risks of exclusion.

- Global advocacy: Women 4 STEM has represented Australian women at global forums, including preparations for the UN Commission on the Status of Women. In 2026, we are

confirmed to present at CSW70, ensuring STEM equity is firmly positioned within the international human rights agenda.

5. Has your work been impacted by funding cuts in the past 12 months?

Yes. Despite growing demand for our programs, we face significant funding constraints. In 2024, our income declined by 22%, resulting in a net deficit of $123,162. This was due to reduced sponsorships and the absence of consistent government support. Corporate sponsorships remain our main revenue stream, but this model is not sustainable for scaling nationally or delivering outreach in rural and regional communities.

6. If impacted, how are you mitigating the effects of cuts?

We mitigate these cuts by leveraging one of our greatest strengths: our volunteer base. In 2024 alone, 180–250 volunteers contributed more than 20,000 hours. Over two decades, this equates to 463,710 hours, or $20 million in imputed value. This contribution demonstrates the resilience of civic space when communities come together.

We also mitigate funding pressures by:
- Introducing tiered partnership models (LEAD, LIFT, LAUNCH) to diversify corporate investment.
- Scaling digital delivery, allowing participants from rural and regional areas to join programs remotely.
- Launching new fundraising campaigns tied to our 20th Anniversary milestone.
- Partnering with universities and schools to co-deliver programs at reduced cost.

7. What is the single biggest risk you face in your work?

The biggest risk is exclusion, whether through lack of funding, hostile workplaces, or online harassment. Specifically:

- Funding precarity: If resources decline, we risk closing programs that provide the only free STEM engagement for schoolgirls in Australia.

- Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV): Women in STEM increasingly face online harassment, including targeted abuse, threats, and trolling. This silences women's voices and deters participation in both civic debate and professional networks.

- Workplace inequities: Gender pay gaps and discriminatory practices persist in STEM

fields, particularly in engineering and technology. Without systemic reform, women's career progression stalls, reducing the pool of future leaders.

Together, these risks threaten both individuals and the broader civic space necessary for women to contribute fully to STEM.

8. Are international human rights standards still relevant?

Yes. Frameworks such as CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly Goals 4 on education, 5 on gender equality, 8 on decent work, and 9 on industry and innovation) remain essential. They provide benchmarks for holding governments accountable and affirm that equal participation in STEM is not optional but a human right.

9. Are international mechanisms effective in protecting human rights defenders?

International mechanisms provide visibility, legitimacy, and a framework for advocacy, but they are limited in their ability to protect women in STEM who face workplace discrimination or online harassment. Greater integration of gender and STEM equity into human rights reporting is needed, alongside recognition that women advocating for inclusion in technology are, themselves, human rights defenders.

12. The most important message you would like the Special Rapporteur to bring to the international community

STEM is shaping every aspect of our societies. If women are excluded, half the population is denied their rights, and the innovations that emerge risk being unsafe and unjust.

We call on the international community to:
1. Recognise STEM equity as a human rights issue.
2. Protect women in STEM as defenders of safe, inclusive, ethical technologies.
3. Address TFGBV and online harassment as structural barriers to civic space.
4. Resource women's organisations like Women 4 STEM to scale programs.
5. Ensure women are represented in global governance of AI and emerging technologies.

Only by embedding women's voices in the design, governance, and oversight of technology can we ensure a safe and ethical future.

Conclusion

For 20 years, Women 4 STEM has been a volunteer-powered movement bridging schools, universities, workplaces, and global forums. Our impact now exceeds $20 million in value, a testament to the power of collective civic action. We call for urgent recognition that gender equality in STEM is not simply about representation, but about protecting human rights, ensuring equitable civic space, and safeguarding the ethical future of our societies.