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Statement submitted by Soroptimist International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Soroptimist International and the signatories of this statement recognise the stark reality that all women and girls face regarding inequality and discrimination, equal opportunities and equitable outcomes. The Copenhagen Declaration aspired to “place people at the centre of development by ensuring full participation by all”. Yet, 30 years later, we are far from reaching full gender equality across public and private life.

Soroptimist International’s mission to “educate, empower and enable” all women and girls, permeates the key components of the Copenhagen Declaration. We urge Member States to prioritise these components: eradicating poverty, promoting full and productive employment, and fostering social inclusion. By prioritising these commitments, Member States can advance towards more peaceful and prosperous communities by ensuring that women and girls are valued as equal members of society, and whose human rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled at all levels.

1. Eradicating Poverty

In 2022, an estimated 388 million women and girls were living in extreme poverty (1 in 10 women), compared with 372 million men and boys. This equates to over 700 million people – or 10 per cent of the global population – surviving on less than USD 1.90 per day.

Today, 763 million individuals globally – 67 per cent of whom are women – still cannot read or write. Yet, Soroptimist International’s diverse educational projects at the grassroots level have continued to demonstrate, for the last century, that education is a catalyst for overcoming poverty. Recognised globally by Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education, the cross-cutting benefits of education on sustainable development and its fundamental role in achieving gender equality are established human rights under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Educating women and girls goes beyond individual empowerment; it produces better health outcomes, fuels economic growth, and contributes to stable and peaceful societies. The social and economic imperative to improve access to education and training for women and girls is evident, with better-educated women contributing to informed healthcare, reduced fertility rates, and healthier children. A 2018 World Bank study underlines the economic impact of a missed education, revealing that restricted access to 12 years of education for girls globally costs countries USD 15-30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings. In addition, the same World Bank study highlights that women with a primary education earn 15 per cent more than women with no education at all.

Persistent disparities in access to education are driven by, for example, income gaps, gender-based violence, socio-economic barriers, conflict, and climate change. Poverty and education are interconnected, with high poverty levels making education even less accessible. Furthermore, even when education is available, children – especially girls - are often expected to work inside and outside of the home and earn money rather than attending school. Women and girls face accentuated risks of violence and discrimination, trafficking, and child, early and forced marriage and unions, placing them in particularly vulnerable situations.

In addition, wealth and income inequalities – including the gender pay gap – have continued to increase both within and between countries, and disproportionately impact women and girls, contributing to increasing levels of poverty. Gendered income poverty is a real issue that can have catastrophic implications for the health, wellbeing and status of all women and girls,

including older women. According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, approximately 3.9 million women worldwide face legal barriers that affect their economic participation, and on average, women earn just 77 cents for every dollar paid to men.

2. Promoting Full and Productive Employment

Quality education accessible beyond the primary level can drive positive change by offering women and girls the opportunity to develop their full capacity, including by engaging in social entrepreneurship or finding meaningful employment.

According to UNESCO, the literacy gender gap is the result of unequal access to basic education. In today's digital era, and particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, women and girls continue to fall behind as they lack digital literacy skills on top of basic literacy skills, which in turn impedes their ability to undertake many forms of paid work. Bridging the gender digital divide is essential for fair representation in tech jobs, managerial roles, and academic careers. The achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 is dependent on embracing opportunities and challenges presented by technology and other frontier innovations such as artificial intelligence. Fully funded programmes must be implemented to expand all women and girls' participation in science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics (STEAM) as well as mentor and prepare them for their choice of employment to avoid occupational segregation and reach gender parity and equal opportunities to work in the field.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vital role that some jobs – previously defined as 'unskilled' – have in maintaining the running of health, education, retail, and food supply sectors, among others. Oftentimes these have been roles filled by women and have largely been low paid. However, this must now be reassessed. These workers make up the poorest in the workforce and in many countries are not covered by government rescue packages or social protection schemes and thus sink further into poverty. Care work has also traditionally been categorised as a 'woman's' job, which has perpetuated systemic social, cultural, and economic barriers for women worldwide. Specifically, unpaid care work remains a significant challenge for women and girls who continue to act as primary caregivers of children and families, especially given that the care economy is growing in line with the increased demand for childcare and care for the elderly in regions across the world. The persisting care crisis is a gender crisis that hampers positive social development and any progress towards gender equality and social inclusion.

Economic empowerment, education and training, gender budgeting, and equal distribution of resources, assets and services are critical to the advancement of women, the achievement of gender equality, and the realisation of women's human rights. There is still a long way to go to recognise the role of women in leadership in all sectors of the economy from community leadership roles, while at corporate Board level there is still an even bigger gender gap, especially in science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics (STEAM). Workplaces must be safe, enabling and empowering spaces for all workers, including women at all job levels. All measures must be taken to ensure places of work are free from all forms of violence as per the International Labour Organisation Convention 190.

3. Fostering Social Inclusion

Disadvantage, including in obtaining social protection or other necessary services, is often based on gender, age, location, occupation, race, ethnicity, disability, among many other self-identifying factors. This kind of social exclusion robs individuals of dignity, security, and the opportunity to lead a better life.

Social protection system floors must be implemented to ensure basic income throughout the life course, including at pension age. Member States are required to ensure that all women and girls have fair and equitable structures for lifelong contributions, including times when they are working as unpaid carers, unemployed, between employment or have health challenges or are or become disabled, to ensure financial security throughout their life course. Social development policies must be underpinned by basic human rights that guarantee the full protection of all women of all ages. When women and girls are included in social protection systems, they can positively contribute as part of the solution to achieving economic justice.

Along with the provision of supportive health systems, a healthy environment, adequate housing to meet family needs and the safety of social security financial provisions across the life span, all women and girls could be lifted out of poverty and enabled into a self-sustaining future. Investments in universal healthcare, including access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, adequate and affordable housing, water and food security including clean water and sanitation, and low-cost nutritious food, all of which are essential to advancing gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Such investments, alongside equal access to quality education, can put all women and girls on a positive footing to empower and enable them to work towards a self-sustaining future.

Recommendations

The meaningful inclusion of all women and girls in all aspects of public life has been statistically proven to advance economies, realise social cohesion, and contribute to sustainable and peaceful communities. Soroptimist International and the signatories of this statement urge all United Nations Member States to implement the following recommendations:

- Ratify and honour their obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child – including by adapting their national laws;
- Ratify International Labour Organisation Convention 190 on the elimination of violence in the world of work, to promote women and girl’s access to education, training and careers;
- Expedite efforts across all sustainable development measures and activities to achieve girls’ and women’s full participation in high-quality education and training through a human-rights based approach at whatever life stage they have reached;
- Embrace gender mainstreaming across all aspects of education and training. This should include the institutional measures of gender budgeting and financing for development, supporting and targeting women-specific policies and programmes that address gender discrimination and its impact in education;
- Increase investments in quality and lifelong learning, and create specific, targeted programmes, including on digital technology and literacy, and science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics (STEAM) subjects which would enable all women and girls into paid work, education and training;

- Implement social and cultural programmes involving men and boys to prevent continuing discrimination that devalues women and girls, their abilities, their educational achievements and their economic contributions;
- Ensure gender equal representation at all levels in economic decision-making and the formation of financial policies;
- Enact and enforce legislation to guarantee the rights of women and men to equal pay for work of equal value by establishing non-discriminatory liveable wages throughout the life course to bridge the gender pay gap;
- Remove with immediate effect any and all legal obstacles and facilitate women's access to productive resources, including but not limited to land, credit, capital, property, and inheritance; and
- Engage in gender-responsive budgeting to analyse, plan, implement, and monitor income and expenditure to more equally distribute resources.

Signatories:
