



## **Economic and Social Council**

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### **Commission on the Status of Women**

**Sixty-ninth session**

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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”**

### **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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

## Statement

The Beijing Platform for Action, adopted in 1995, was widely considered the most “comprehensive and progressive blueprint ever for advancing women’s rights”. Regrettably, despite pockets of hard-earned achievements and progress towards achieving gender equality and the fulfilment of all women and girls’ human rights, global trends have demonstrated a disturbing rollback of even the most basic rights. Soroptimist International’s focus to ‘educate, empower and enable’ all women and girls points us to Critical Area number 2 (Strategic objectives B.1-B.6) as a specific area of concern.

### Critical Area 2: Education and Training of Women

Access to high-quality education and training throughout the life course transforms lives and communities. Recognised globally by Critical Area 2 or Strategic objectives B.1-B.6 and Sustainable Development Goal 4, 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 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Education must be safe, inclusive, of a high quality, continuing and accessible to all, covering all aspects of life.

Educating all women and girls goes beyond individual empowerment; it produces better health outcomes, fuels economic growth, and contributes towards stable and peaceful societies. The social and economic imperative to improve access to education and training for all women and girls is evident. Educated women make more informed healthcare decisions, leading to lower fertility rates and healthier children. A 2018 World Bank study underlines the economic impact, revealing that restricted access to 12 years of education for girls globally costs countries USD 15-30 trillion in lost productivity and earnings.

Despite some progress, recent data reveals persistent disparities in access to education driven by income gaps, violence against women and girls, socio-economic barriers, conflict, and climate change. According to UN Women, an estimated 388 million women and girls were living in poverty in 2022. Poverty and education are interconnected, with high poverty levels making education less accessible. Furthermore, even when education is available, children – especially girls – are often expected to work inside and outside the home to earn money or participate in unpaid work rather than attending school. Education is therefore a vehicle towards achieving equitable opportunities for all girls, but equally to ensure their safety from vulnerable situations like child, early and forced marriage and unions, or human trafficking. The rights of all children, in particular the rights of all girls, must be respected, protected and fulfilled at all levels, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Critical Area 12 (The Girl Child) of the Beijing Platform for Action.

### Critical Area 6: Women and the Economy

The global COVID-19 pandemic highlighted many jobs which have, in the past, been defined as ‘unskilled’; yet are vital to maintaining the running of health, education, retail, and food supply sectors. These were traditionally considered female roles and have largely been underpaid or even unpaid. These workers are considered the poorest in the workforce and in many countries are not covered by government rescue packages or social protection schemes.

Care work has also traditionally been categorised as a ‘women’s’ job, which has perpetuated systemic social, cultural, and therefore, economic barriers for all women and girls worldwide. Specifically, unpaid care work remains a significant challenge for all women and girls who continue to act as primary caregivers of children and families, especially given the increased demand for childcare and care for the elderly in regions across the world. It is estimated that 606 million women are outside the labour market because of their unpaid care

responsibilities. The persisting care crisis is a gender crisis that hampers positive social development and any progress towards gender equality. Gendered patterns of all women's inability to access pensions often stems from their exclusion from waged work throughout their life course. Inclusive parenting policies, like paid and shared parental leave are crucial to addressing the care crisis. Governments must implement strategies to recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work, while allocating resources for childcare and elder care. Care work should be viewed as a shared responsibility across all settings.

Equal pay for work of equal value must be implemented without reservation. Bridging the persisting gender pay gap – which continues to unfairly impact women – is essential to tackling deeply rooted gender inequalities in the workplace and widespread, systemic misogyny. In addition, while the shift to online working and learning can offer more flexibility, those most negatively impacted by this shift have been all women and girls, due to their lack of access to the internet, the lack of knowledge of digital technologies, and digital services. Ensuring a safe, quality and lifelong education is fundamental to ensure that all women and girls can develop skills and knowledge in science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM). This rapidly emerging field, including the fast expansion of artificial intelligence, can provide opportunities for all women and girls to lead in new sectors.

In addition, equal participation of all women and girls in decision-making and leadership roles (Critical Area 7) is crucial to ensuring their unique experiences are reflected in legislation and policy. Women's leadership should be seen as an opportunity for more inclusive and sustainable development across all sectors. To achieve this, deeply rooted gender norms must be challenged by addressing systemic prejudices and discrimination in the workplace. Economic empowerment, education and training, gender-responsive budgeting, equal distribution of resources, and access to opportunities are vital for advancing women, achieving gender equality, and realising the full spectrum of their human rights.

### Critical Area 3: Women and Health

All women and girls often face barriers to accessing quality information and services regarding their health. These barriers include lower literacy rates, limited decision-making power, and inadequate healthcare provider awareness of their specific needs, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights. As a result, they face higher risks of unintended pregnancies, cervical cancer, and HIV. Harmful practices like female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage and unions further threaten their physical and mental health, reduce their chances of completing education, and negatively impact their future opportunities.

Violence against all women and girls is a global emergency that must be responded to as such, with every 1 in 3 women worldwide experiencing a form of physical, mental or sexual violence in their lifetime. Tackling this epidemic requires addressing systemic violence and harmful, embedded gendered norms in public and private life and on- and offline. It is critical that persons of all gender identities are committed allies to respecting, protecting and fulfilling the health rights of all women and girls. Governments must prioritise the physical and mental health and healthcare of all women and girls, including the right to a healthy environment, to ensure they can achieve their full potential and be active, contributing members of society.

### Conclusion

Three decades later, where is gender equality?

In a time of growing political instability, climate breakdown, economic crisis, and increasing conflicts, all women and girls are paying the heaviest price. With only five years to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the international community sits at a critical juncture at which our future and the future of our youth depends on the actions taken today. Governments must prioritise human rights and gender equality and recognise the benefits they have when promoted across all sectors of society.

Soroptimist International remains steadfast in its commitment to educate, empower and enable all women and girls worldwide to achieve gender equality. Soroptimist International urges all United Nations Member States to collaborate with civil society organisations and other stakeholders, because together we can achieve more.

#### Recommendations

Soroptimist International and all signatories to this statement urgently call upon all United Nations Member States to:

- Expedite efforts across all sustainable development measures to achieve all girls' and women's full participation in high-quality education and training through a human rights-based approach throughout the life course;
- Ratify and implement their obligations under the Beijing Platform for Action and Declaration, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and International Labour Organisation standards for all forms of training, ensuring gender equal representation at all levels in economic decision-making and the formation of financial policies;
- Prioritise and award scholarships and bursary provisions, in particular for marginalised groups, to ensure accessible education for all;
- 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, and eliminate occupational segregation, which would enable all women and girls into paid work, education and training;
- Ensure that all schools and educational facilities have safe water and sanitation facilities, enabling all women and girls to continue their education safely and with dignity, at all stages;
- Facilitate safe educational environments, including safety from cyber harassment and bullying, as well as safe transport routes to and from all educational facilities;
- Enact and enforce legislation to guarantee the rights of all 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;
- Recognise care as a societal responsibility and adopt inclusive strategies to shift resources to respond to the growing need for childcare and elder care;
- Engage in gender-responsive budgeting to analyse, plan, implement, and monitor income and expenditure to more equally distribute resources;
- Adopt inclusive, universal physical, mental health and healthcare via increased investments in quality healthcare provisions, staffing, training and community education programmes;
- Provide universal quality physical, mental health and healthcare, especially maternal health and childcare supported by appropriate education and information on sexual and reproductive health rights; and
- Implement universal social protection system floors to alleviate poverty by ensuring that human rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.

#### Signatories:

Austrian Family Planning Association  
Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development  
Centrs Marta  
Dianova International  
European Federation of Older Persons  
Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas  
Girls Not Brides: The Partnership to End Child Marriage  
Global Campaign for Education

Graduate Women International  
International Alliance of Women  
International Association of Democratic Lawyers  
International Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Women  
International Federation on Ageing  
International Health Awareness Network  
International Inner Wheel  
Latter-day Saint Charities  
Make Mothers Matter  
NGO Committee on Sustainable Development – NY Inc  
Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland  
Soroptimist International of Europe  
Soroptimist International South East Asia Pacific  
The Millennium Institute  
Widows for Peace through Democracy  
Women for Water Partnership  
Women’s International Zionist Organization  
World Union for Progressive Judaism  
Zonta International