

**Soroptimist International Statement for the 60th Session of the  
Commission on Social Development**

**Gender Equality and Social Protection**

Soroptimist International presents this statement on behalf of its members active in 122 countries and the organisations signatory to this statement. Together, we work with communities and those left furthest behind. When government policies do not achieve their aims, CSOs like us step in. During the COVID-19 pandemic, CSOs filled gaps in social protection, took steps to make emergency measures more effective, and ensured policies translated into grassroots implementation. CSOs provided emergency support – distributing food, providing shelter to women and girls fleeing violence and facing homelessness, ensuring access to training and education to secure sustainable livelihoods, and providing microfinancing to businesses. All these actions are vital for human dignity and wellbeing. We know women and girls are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. For COVID-19 recovery to be sustainable and resilient, CSOs, especially those representing women and girls in all their diversity, should be involved in creating gender-transformative policies. It is critical that the world builds back better by investing in policies rooted in human dignity and wellbeing.

The challenges facing women and girls during the pandemic are well-known. Many countries have watched their progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and social development regress. Economic disparities between men and women, girls and boys, became more acute, contributing to multidimensional poverty increasing in all countries. Rates of gender-based violence increased. Women were the first to face unemployment, often because of caring responsibilities or working in the informal sector. Frequently, women had to be both caregivers and workers, contributing to women's shrinking employment opportunities. For some, securing an income means working in unsafe environments to avoid poverty, homelessness and food insecurity. On average, women were less able to absorb economic shocks in comparison to men as they lacked financial safety nets due to long-term gender discrimination on pay, pensions and access to social protection systems and floors. Women and girls struggled to access high-quality mental and reproductive health services as they could not access healthcare clinics. Young women, unable to secure their future, will live with the varied impacts of COVID-19 for years. To address this, state budgets should be reorientated to improve social protection. Countries' debt burden should be relieved to support this process.

Women are on the frontline of fighting COVID-19, be it in the health sector, the world of work, or at home. Women's knowledge and skills were relied upon to keep communities and economies afloat while facing increased caring and education responsibilities at home. As states 'build forward better', women and girls must be at the heart of sustainable policies and actions. This must include ensuring food security, housing, and high quality education and healthcare that is free or affordable.

Food security is an increasing challenge to women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic. Compounding factors of multidimensional poverty, unemployment, rising prices and travel limitations all made it harder for women and girls to access food. Food distribution was among the most significant of emergency support measures CSOs provided. As global food systems can produce enough food for everyone, no one should face food insecurity. Sustainable food production and distribution systems must be made resilient to prevent people facing hunger and malnutrition, even in emergency contexts.

Women and girls know the challenges that face them best, as well as the solutions which help the most. Women should be full, equal, effective and meaningful partners, leaders and decision makers in COVID-19 responses to regain the progress made towards the 2030 Agenda. Specific and targeted gender-transformative, inclusive and human rights-based programmes can rectify the harm caused by inequalities experienced by women and girls in all their diversity.

When addressing gender-based economic inequality, we must acknowledge and confront the multifaceted causes of inequality. Combatting gender inequalities requires redistributing work within households and addressing traditional gender roles. Barriers to education at all ages, lack of accessible and affordable childcare, gender-based violence, trafficking, abusive labour conditions, inadequate healthcare, poor quality housing and other factors prevent women and girls reaching their potential and contributing to sustainability. Government policies have the power to change this.

To ensure inclusive and resilient recovery from COVID-19, secure sustainable livelihoods, promote well-being and dignity for all, and eradicate poverty and hunger, it is vital that states invest in education and training, ensure universal access to digital technologies, strengthen social protection and ensure that economies and the world of work respond to climate change. Achieving gender equality is fundamental to promoting human dignity and well-being. Improving human dignity and well-being provides a lens through which all policies can be viewed cohesively. Making the world a better place to live for all people underpins all sustainable development efforts.

### ***Lifelong learning and leadership for sustainable livelihoods***

Education is transformative. However, for educational opportunities to translate into sustainable economic outcomes, policy areas must be joined-up to ensure that women can be equal participants and leaders in the economic sphere. In the wake of COVID-19, more girls are subjected to early, child or forced marriage, or are trafficked, preventing them from accessing education. Fewer girls are returning to schools after lockdowns and school closures. Frequently economic impacts means families have to choose which of their children to educate. Expanding education and training opportunities for girls and women responds to this. Scholarships, informal education and retraining opportunities, and other programmes all have roles to play in promoting women's economic empowerment.

Specific efforts must be made to identify women and girls missing education, including those working in abusive labour conditions, trafficked workers, indentured servants or under conditions of modern day slavery. They must be given free education, including retraining,

and be fully supported to access safe economic opportunities. Employers who exploit women must be investigated, prosecuted and held accountable.

### ***Digital technologies to eradicate poverty***

Today work and education relies upon having access to technology, reliable electricity and family support. Many women and girls do not have this access due to the digital divide or because the needs of men and boys are prioritised within the household. In some cases, programmes are directed at ‘heads of households’, most often men. This leaves women out from participating in sustainable development programmes regarding technology. For others, particularly those in lower-waged jobs, home working is not possible due to the nature of the sector they work in. The gender digital divide must be overcome to secure sustainable livelihoods for women.

Technology affordability is a significant barrier to girls and women throughout the lifecycle that impacts women accessing sustainable employment, banking, and education. Technologies can improve access to essential services — apps have helped survivors of gender-based violence find support, homeless women find shelters, and women and girls access health information. Education and literacy, and specifically training in digital technologies, as well as infrastructure rollout all play a role in ending the digital divide.

### ***Social protection supports wellbeing and dignity for all***

Social protection systems and floors can break intergenerational cycles of poverty and ensure fundamental human rights, including access to quality healthcare, sexual and reproductive healthcare, mental healthcare, education, food, sanitation, and job opportunities. These are vital to promoting sustainable livelihoods and reaching those furthest behind first. As informal sectors collapsed, many women were left without social protection, which is targeted at those who are formally employed. For those who have access to social protections, like pensions, there are frequently gender gaps, with women receiving less than men as a result of discrimination accumulated over the lifecycle.

Urgent action must be taken to ensure all public services, social protection systems and floors use a joined-up approach so women and girls can access the services and support they need and are entitled to. This is especially important in rural areas, where there is less infrastructure and people rely more on private resources that women frequently have less access to.

### **Recommendations:**

As countries attempt to ‘build forward better’ the world has a unique opportunity to restructure to ensure COVID-19 impacts are not long-lasting. To harness this opportunity, the signatories to this statement recommend the following:

- In collaboration with International Financial Institutions develop and promote the funding of COVID-19 recovery plans — including through debt relief — that focus on

dignity, care and equality to facilitate just transitions to sustainable economies with decent work for everyone.

- Ensure the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of COVID-19 recovery plans include women's full, equal, effective and meaningful participation and leadership.
- Expand education and training opportunities for all women and girls, ensuring they have access to all levels of education throughout their lifecourse. All people have a right to education, to fill gaps in their essential education and should have the opportunity to retrain to maximise economic opportunity and sustainability.
- Scholarship programmes targeted towards women and girls, particularly those who have experienced vulnerabilities, must be expanded and developed. This includes improving scholarship access for women and girls from lower and middle income countries.
- Increase the use of cash awards, including scholarships, microloans and microfinancing, that recognise that the women recipients are best placed to know how that money would best benefit them.
- Childcare policies must be reformed so all women who want to work can. All childcare services must be free or affordable.
- Technology and internet access must be increased through international cooperation to improve infrastructure and to make technologies including mobile phones more affordable.
- Social protection should be fully funded, resourced and accessible. These services are undermined when their existence is dependent upon donations.

To respond to COVID-19 and secure sustainable livelihoods, CSOs and other stakeholders must be included in meaningful consultations, recognising that as experts CSOs have rapidly responded to the needs of women, girls and their communities during the pandemic. This must be done if inequalities in society, and specifically gender inequality, are to be overcome.