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A MESSAGE FROM YOUR PROGRAMME TEAM!

Most countries around the world have signed international agreements on women's rights yet women today are still much more likely than men to be poor and illiterate. Women's economic empowerment combined with education is undoubtedly the way forward. As Soroptimists, we know this well! This month's *Programme News* highlights various forms of empowerment and showcases the truly inspiring projects Soroptimists are running to concretely contribute to improving women's living conditions!

*Maria-Elisabetta de Franciscis, President Elect & Head of Programme & Advocacy**
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This month we talk about: ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

WHAT DOES WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT MEAN TODAY?

The importance of women's economic empowerment stems from one simple fact: women represent the vast majority of the world's poor, meaning that empowering them and ensuring they are economically self-sufficient can dramatically reduce poverty around the world. In this sense, economic empowerment is the process of securing basic opportunities for marginalised people and actively working against forces that deny those opportunities. It also includes encouraging and developing skills for self-sufficiency with a focus on eliminating the future need for help. Our practical experience tells us this process can be difficult to start and to implement but that in no way diminishes its importance for women and for the world.

Since the start of the global economic crisis, women's economic empowerment has also become a challenge within developed countries. Before the start of the crisis, we were busy breaking down cultural barriers and ensuring rights such as the right to equal pay for equal work were fully recognised. Since the crisis, however, we have been faced with the challenge of training women for new "innovative" tasks which can turn current negative economic trends into an instrument of recovery.

This is, in fact, exactly what **UN Women** and the **UN Global Compact** did when on March 8, 2010, they launched the seven [Women's](#)

[Empowerment Principles](#) that are to be introduced in workplaces. The UN invited us to advocate for: Establishing high level corporate leadership for gender equality; Treating all women and men fairly at work; Ensuring the health, safety and well being of all women and men workers; Promoting education, training and professional development for women; Implementing enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women; Promoting equality through community initiatives and advocacy; Measuring and publicly reporting on progress to achieve gender equality.

Luckily today women do not only have to rely on traditional tools for empowerment such as schooling, professional training, micro-credit and scholarships. The process of globalisation has also proven to be an excellent tool for self-empowerment. With the Internet, easy access to e-learning has allowed many women to study from home whenever it suits them. By empowering themselves through e-learning women are acquiring new skills for today's globalised world.

Finally, in line with President Ulla's *Let's Go Green* biennium theme, we should consider the crucial importance of the sustainability of economic empowerment. As Soroptimists working towards women's economic empowerment, we should always keep an eye towards how our activities impact not only humanity but the very planet we live on.

Maria Elisabetta de Franciscis

* currently acting Programme Director in lieu of Christine Peer, on duty leave for personal reasons



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35,000 SOROPTIMISTS WORKING FOR WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT!

Some highlights of recent projects conducted by Soroptimists across Europe and Africa!

Women's autonomy

In 2009, the **Soroptimist Club in Ede** in the Netherlands started an initiative to support 50 women in **Quetta, Pakistan** by providing them with practical training and the tools to manage and grow their own finances. By learning to make and sell clothes commercially, these women are now able to provide for themselves. The Club loaned sewing machines and provided teachers and training premises. The participants are now financially independent and make a significant contribution towards their household income.



Right to own land

In Africa, one the largest barriers to improving agricultural productivity and women's revenues is the problem of land ownership. Although Rwandan legislation recognises equal rights for men and women, discrimination against women regarding land ownership is still widespread in the country. This situation led the **Italian Union, in collaboration with Soroptimists in Kigali**, to put in place eight training sessions over three days to advise both women and men about discrimination against women in the fields of land ownership, family law, inheritance and ownership rights. The courses took place in the **San Marco centre in Kigali** and attracted 300 people from all over Rwanda.

Inspiring women to work

To motivate and inspire women in their community to find skilled work, Soroptimists in **Marmara, Turkey** organised a constructive meeting with women who work for the *Balat House of Culture*. Over a meal, local women and professional women from Marmara were able to exchange views, with

the former being encouraged to consider the many possibilities that the work place has to offer women at all levels. Soroptimists hope that this will prompt women to acquire further training, ultimately helping them to secure fulfilling work.

Teaching female leadership

In Israel, young girls from the Bedouin community are raised in an environment with traditions and customs which often impede their access to education and a career. **The Hanegev Club in Israel**



organised a series of meetings, conferences and role plays with young girls in the region's Bedouin community, explaining the various work opportunities available to them, as well as the importance of education and vocational training. Soroptimists hope that this initiative will encourage the young girls to recognise their potential and that they, in turn, will provide role models to other girls in their community.

Training women in prison

Soroptimists from the **Kakamega Club in Kenya** launched a large-scale project to improve the lives of young, vulnerable women in prison. Soroptimists provided study grants and helped with vocational training, teaching them seamstress skills, whilst at the same time improving their children's everyday lives. These women are shown to leave prison with



higher self-esteem. They are able to put into practice the skills they acquired and have a better chance of securing a job. **The Club of Kakamega** received support for this project from the Kenyan Foreign Affairs Minister and from **Soroptimists in Oulou in Finland**, as well as from **Soroptimists in the Netherlands and Norway**.

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GENERAL PROGRAMME NEWS

BOARD MEETING IN GENEVA

The Soroptimist International of Europe Board met in Geneva on January 24-25, 2014. They report some very important developments:

- Three new countries will soon be joining SIE! Club openings are planned for the first time in Serbia, in the northern city of Subotica, as well as in Dubai and Kuwait, thus strengthening the SIE presence in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. A ballot concerning the opening of the Soroptimist Club in Serbia has already been sent out to all SIE Governors for approval. We look forward to welcoming these new Clubs and countries to SIE!
- The Board has agreed that Soroptimist International of Europe will, over the next months, be launching an innovative and highly ambitious study on Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) – a problem of pandemic proportions which affects an enormous number of women around the world regardless of nationality, class, culture, and religion. The study, which is being guided by a number of leading international experts, will examine VAWG in all 60 countries of our Federation. More news on the study and ways in which you can get involved will follow soon!

PROJECT REPORTING (PFR)

SIE Headquarters would like to thank you for your patience and your understanding with the recent issues with the PFR system. The PFR system run by SI has been fixed and members and Clubs are encouraged to once again start submitting their PFR reports.

As previously announced, Soroptimist International of Europe is also finalising its own, brand new PFR system that will be multilingual and more user friendly. More than anything though, the new PFR system will automatically display all your projects on an interactive map that will appear on the homepage of the SIE website, showcasing your great work to the world!

Not to worry – all PFRs that you now submit to the SI PFR system will also be made available on the interactive map so we strongly encourage you to complete your PFRs. Similarly, in the future, we will automatically transfer all PFRs submitted in the SIE PFR system to SI as well.

BEST PRACTICE AWARDS 2014

A heartfelt thank you to all of you who have submitted projects for this year's Best Practice Awards! The response has been extremely strong and the projects impressive!

The Best Practice Awards 2014 jury consisting of 5 members of the Board and SIE Headquarters staff is looking forward to going through your submissions. Winners will be announced at the Governors' Meetings in Copenhagen in July!

BEST PRACTICES 2014

Soroptimist



International of Europe



MAY 23-25: SEMINAR IN GENEVA

As mentioned in the January *Programme News*, Soroptimist International of Europe Headquarters in Geneva will soon be hosting a **brand new 2-day Programme and Advocacy Training Seminar for SIE Programme Directors!** The dates have been set: the training will take place between **May 23 and 25!** Stay tuned for more details which will be coming to all Unions and Single Clubs shortly.

PHOTO CONTEST

It's time to show off your photographic skills!

Soroptimist International of Europe is organising a photo competition called *With Your Eyes Only*. Following President Ulla's biennium theme, *Let's Go Green*, the competition is seeking to raise awareness about a healthy and sustainable environment.

Awards will be given in four different categories: Stop Wasting, Healthy Environment, Climate Change, and Women and Girls for a Healthy Environment. Soroptimists and non-Soroptimists alike are invited to participate! All pictures will be on show in Copenhagen in July 2014 which is also when the winners will be announced.

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PROJECT MATCHING

Thank you for your continued support for Project Matching! If you are already supporting a project, or are in partnership with another SI club or another local organisation, please do share your activities with us! The site is updated regularly to include all the new projects waiting for support. Please get in touch if you would like your project to be added.



SOROPTIMIST PROJECT MATCHING

Here is a superb initiative dedicated to women's economic empowerment that is still looking for funding:

Kibungo Club, Rwanda - Equipping women with the know-how to enable them to create their own small food processing activities (RW0002)

This project is designed to help vulnerable women currently working in the precarious casual labour market to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to set up and manage a small food processing business under a cooperative umbrella.

The principal objectives are to:

- Provide basic training on accounting, credit management and follow-up, and project evaluation and marketing, together with information concerning new food technologies (such as organic farming);
- Share important health information, especially with regards to nutrition, prevention of HIV/Aids, and family planning;
- Set up a fund to provide loans to female members of the cooperatives;
- Establish a vocational training college to help women find work in the formal job market.

The required budget for this project is **€5,300** and the club is still looking for financing.

For further information, please go to:

<http://soroptimistprojects.org/projects/rw0002>

WOMEN & THE GREEN ECONOMY

A quick *Google* search on "eco businesses started by women" generates many results of women who have started their own companies dedicated to green design, green gifts, and even green weddings! To us, this is hardly surprising: as Soroptimists, we have on so many occasions seen the positive impact green businesses and green thinking can have not only on the environment but on women's economic independence and confidence as well!

But we should also be aware of the bigger picture:

As things stand now, women risk remaining marginalised as developed and developing economies increasingly invest in green businesses. So much so in fact that the concept of the "green economy" is said to be exacerbating gender inequality. This is largely because the vast majority of green jobs that are being created are in the construction, energy, and manufacturing sectors – all of which traditionally employ men. In fact, the green economy, while inarguably beneficial for environmental sustainability, has so far often failed to take into account important social factors such as gender equality.



At the same time, studies show that women are more environmentally conscious than men and that they tend to be more ecologically concerned consumers – both as private citizens and as business owners.

As millions of new green jobs are created in the coming years, a push must be made to ensure women not only have their fair share of jobs and earn equal pay for equal work but that they can become true and equal decision makers – for the sake of society, equality, and the planet alike!

Sources:

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PROGRAMME NEWS

COUNTRY FOCUS: SWITZERLAND!

Switzerland is one of a number of Soroptimist International of Europe Unions which focus heavily on improving women's financial autonomy and on supporting viable long-term commercial solutions for women. This is why we have chosen Switzerland as this month's *Country Focus*.

With **59 clubs** boasting **1,800 active members**, the Swiss Union, founded in 1950, continues to expand, as evidenced by the creation of two **new clubs in 2013: Gstaad-Saenenland and Zürichsee**.

Swiss Soroptimists are very active in promoting financial autonomy for women. They have teamed up and jointly launched a highly ambitious project entitled *Microcrédit Soroptimist - Microcrédit Solidaire Suisse*. Presided over by the **Past President of the Swiss Union, Ursula Jutzi**, this joint initiative involves all the Clubs in the Union and is managed in collaboration with *Microcrédit Solidarité Suisse* (MSS). It provides women with professional help from both organisations. Together with the project founders, the **current President of the Swiss Union, Rita Vuichard**, is continuing the collaboration with MSS, ensuring the long-term viability of the project.

"I opened my own makeup studio 3 years ago in Luzern. Being a makeup artist is relatively rare in our region. Now I work for the theater, for the movies, and do private events such as weddings and carnivals. I have a lot of work, my MSS loan has been repaid, and I will soon be moving to a larger studio!"

The purpose of the project is to help women in Switzerland who want to set up their own businesses but who don't have the necessary loan guarantees demanded by banks. The concept is simple: part of each Swiss Union member's annual membership fees make up one part of the funding, while the other part comes from fundraising at Club level. Until today, Swiss Soroptimists have collected CHF 300'000 for this project which has allowed them to sponsor 19 beneficiaries who have used their loans to open small businesses! Soroptimists spread the word among their peers or via other women's networks to identify possible candidates. Afterwards, they provide help and support to ensure a positive outcome. This is a perfect example of mutual support that can guarantee the long-term viability of such a large project!

This ambitious project has been extremely successful and continues to be one of the Union's proudest achievements. The substantial media interest it has

generated has given our organisation a strong visibility locally, nationally and internationally. Indeed it shows *"We are an organisation of women, for women"*. It is in recognition of this excellent work that Swiss Soroptimists were awarded a **Best Practice Award** in Berlin last July.

There are several other projects being run by Clubs that also deserve special mention. For example, thanks to their fundraising efforts (mainly through the sale of Rubinette apples), the **Neuchâtel Club** is making grants available to young female students who need money to finish their vocational training courses but who can no longer depend on social services. This grant gives women a measure of financial independence which means they can pursue their career choices. In 2013, the Club managed to raise €14'000!



In the same vein, albeit on a smaller scale, the **Berne Club** has enabled a young woman to set about improving her work situation. The substantial sum raised by Soroptimists in the Berne Club was used to buy computer equipment needed by this young woman to pursue her studies. Thanks to this donation, she is now getting closer and closer to achieving her professional objectives. The Club is planning to organise other projects along the same lines.

Swiss Soroptimists have been a driving force in promoting women's financial independence as illustrated by these concrete examples. Their motivation and hard work are an inspiration to Soroptimists across our Federation and beyond!





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EMPOWERMENT WITHOUT PROPERTY?

Let's immediately state the dramatic fact we are addressing here: only 1% of women in the world own land. Even in countries where women account for 75% of the agricultural labour force, they are denied the right to own the land they work and therefore to guarantee subsistence for their families. Not surprisingly, such a lack of resources and capital assets has a detrimental effect on women taking their life into their own hands.

Historically, the right to property and the protection of it has been one of the most controversial human rights. Article 17 of *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* acknowledges it but it goes unrecognized in other UN covenants that followed, including the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR). It therefore appears not as absolute as other human rights, and the way it is implemented is left to the discretion of regional covenants and local laws. Such ambiguity at the international level becomes, of course, volatile when it comes to women's actual enjoyment of property as their human right.

It's mostly in recent years that we have seen a direct engagement of the issue from the perspective of women. The *Beijing Platform for Action* advocated the recognition of a women's right to inheritance and ownership of land and property. *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) highlighted the same and added a further emphasis on the rights and equal treatment of rural women when it comes to land ownership in the framework of agrarian reforms. In the *Millennium Development Goals*, the implementation of which is the priority issue of this year's **Committee on the Status of Women** (CSW) session, women's property

rights are addressed in the context of the eradication of extreme poverty, Goal 1, and gender equality, Goal 3.

In terms of women's economic empowerment, the nature of the right to property is *causa sui* – it is generated within itself. Moreover, it is cyclical and can lead to a vicious circle that obstructs women's access to productive forces when it is not granted. When the terms of its entitlement are unclear, the economic integration of women is hindered because of the initial difficulties of owning in-kind capital. When women are absent in economic life as a result of these structural legal gaps and historical disadvantages, the capacity to own property becomes a perpetual impossibility for them. This is the biggest challenge for women's development as entrepreneurs and for them becoming actors for social and economic change. Property ownership statistics for women are therefore an acid test for determining the general level of economic development and empowerment. The 58th session of the **Commission on the Status of Women** officially deems women's access to productive resources as an emerging issue this year. All of this makes building our capacity to monitor and contribute to women's property rights one of our lasting missions.

- Emine Erdem

IMPORTANT DATES

- Mar 8** International Women's Day
- Mar 20** International Day of Happiness
- Mar 21** International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
- Mar 21** World Down Syndrome Day
- Mar 21** International Day of Forests
- Mar 22** World Water Day

HAVE COMMENTS?

This is YOUR newsletter! If you have a comment, document, link, or anything else that you would like us to communicate in an upcoming edition of the newsletter, please share it with us! Feel free to send your news to programme@soroptimisteurope.org.

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