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Soroptimist International: Anne Simon, Executive Director

A Programme for Women and Girls: Towards the Success of Education for All and Sustainable Development

Let me start with a little Latin. Soroptimist, this somewhat awkward name that dates back almost 100 years, comes from “soror” – women, and “optima” – the best. We are an organisation of women who strive to bring about the very best for other, less privileged women. The best of women, for women.

It is also a happy coincidence, although an unintended one, that the name “Soroptimist” suggests that the 90,000 women who are members of this organisation are not only women working for the very best for other women, but that we are also optimists. And indeed we are.

But some of you might be wondering, who *are* these Soroptimists? Well, we are professional women – doctors, lawyers, teachers, entrepreneurs – who conceptualise and implement projects to better the lives of women and children in our communities.

Our organisation has been around since 1921. We respond to challenges that are global in scope but need to be implemented in accordance with local realities. Today we are 90,000, with some 40,000 of us across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

We witness daily the realities faced by women in our communities and work proudly to improve the lives of women and children.

Our projects fall in five different areas – Education, Economic Empowerment, Health, Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls, and Sustainable Environment – but our guiding principle remains simple: “Educate to Lead.” Almost all of our projects have an educational component, enabling women and children to pursue lifelong learning.

Let me give you an example. A couple of years ago, Soroptimists in the capital of Turkey, Ankara, identified a glaring need in their community: many of the migrant women living in an impoverished area by the medieval Castle in Ankara’s historical centre, didn’t know how to read. They were living in poverty and the doors to employment were essentially closed to them. Soroptimists in Ankara took this problem head on. They started literacy courses for adult migrant women not only to teach them how to read, but to empower them, to give them the tools necessary to be more independent and self-sustaining and to take those initial steps out of poverty. Soroptimists weren’t resigned to the problem! Instead, in their firm belief that women who come from underprivileged backgrounds can, with a little help, acquire the tools necessary to be empowered, to be educated, to be independent, they felt compelled to offer a helping hand. They called this project “It is never too late to learn how to read and write”. Because it isn’t.

As members of a professional women's organisation that is active across 130 different countries, and whose very *raison d'être* is to help and empower women, we know that the concept of literacy goes well beyond simply knowing how to read.

- Are women who know how to read but don't know their rights truly literate?
- Are women whose education hasn't gone beyond basic literacy truly equipped for life?

Literacy is something much broader. Literacy should allow women to be independent, to pursue knowledge, to understand the changes in their societies, to think critically... Just as education is known to be a multiplier right – a right that, when fulfilled, allows for the fulfilment of a whole series of other rights – so literacy is its basic building block, its foundation, the very first step that should lead to...well, to so much more.

Soroptimists understand this from a theoretical standpoint but also from a vast amount of experience. Working under the principle theme of "Educate to Lead", we have been implementing projects to ensure lifelong learning opportunities for women for almost one hundred years now.

Programme and Projects

Our projects, all *locally* designed, *locally* funded, and *locally* implemented, give a sense of the overwhelming challenges women and girls still face today in their pursuit of literacy, in their pursuit of education, in their pursuit of equality.

Indeed, if Soroptimists work on raising awareness about the importance of education for women and girls it is because access to education is still restricted to them.

If we provide scholarships and funding for those in need of primary, secondary, and tertiary schooling, it is because there are many young women the world over who cannot afford to go to school.

If we fundraise for the creation of girl-friendly physical environments in schools, such as proper sanitation facilities, clean water in schools, and safe transport to and from school, it is because girls are still dropping out of school because they cannot go to the bathroom in privacy or because they are in danger simply taking the road to school.

If we implement so-called 'second chance' programmes providing education and training for mature women, it is because the first chance was never really there for them.

If we train female teachers to achieve gender equity in teaching staff, it is because even in the teaching profession women are still at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts.

If we run projects which work to ensure seamless access to formal education for girls and young women in the face of natural disasters, conflict, and forced migration, it is because women and girls are still those who suffer the most when such calamities occur.

But with a good understanding of the situation on the ground, which we have because we are there to witness it; with good planning, fundraising and partnerships, in other words, with some hard work,



which are willing to put in since we have seen the fruit it can bear; and with humility towards those we are trying to help; we can and do make a big difference.

Let me give you some further examples. Take, for instance, a recent project by Soroptimists in Austria. Around the year 2000, they decided to help migrant women hailing from four different continents integrate into their new communities, by running German language courses for them, providing information on citizens' rights, duties and laws in Austria, and sharing festivities and meals. Many of these women have since passed their Austrian citizenship test and obtained employment.

Take also Soroptimists from the United States and Canada. Each year, since 1972, they have been awarding education grants to women who have overcome enormous obstacles including poverty, domestic violence or drug and alcohol abuse – grants that they can use to offset any costs associated with their efforts to attain higher education. They give them a “second chance”, a true shot at lifelong learning, these thousands of women who provide the primary source of financial support for their families. So far, believe it or not, they have given out more than 30 million dollars.

Take Soroptimists from the Philippines who established an Alternative Learning System Academy in 2012 to help out-of-school women and girls finish their high school education, or Soroptimists from Italy who ran a series of legal literacy courses for Rwandan women to help them understand their land rights, or Soroptimists in Greece who are offering training and assistance with starting a business to mothers and housewives who are forced to become the family breadwinners as their husbands have lost their employment, or Soroptimists from Switzerland and Mali who joined forces to build a self-sustaining school, where children study by day, and women take literacy classes in the evenings. Take so many other examples. Take any of the thousands projects Soroptimists ran just this past year and the hundreds of thousands of women and girls they benefitted!

Just last year, 27 million euros were raised across Europe and Africa for projects last year and numerous partnerships with other NGOs were created.

Advocacy

Of course, our responsibility as Soroptimists goes beyond what we can do in our local communities, and that is why I am here in front of you today.

As I mentioned earlier, Soroptimists are unique and credible witnesses to what is happening in our communities. As Soroptimists, we witness daily the changes in our societies and act as what we might call a “barometer” for women's rights in the countries we live in.

Don't just take our word for it. This was recognised decades ago when the United Nations granted us General Consultative Status at ECOSOC.

The Council of Europe did the same when they granted us participatory status.

Such statuses are not merely “nice” rights to have but also meaningful obligations to fulfil. Each day, we witness the progress, and the crises, happening in the world today. It is indeed our responsibility



to provide evidence-based information to these institutions, with what we see are challenges and issues affecting women around the world. We commend and applaud these institutions which do so *much* to promote and safeguard the rights of women – and thereby for their children.

Amongst others, our contributions have given rise to fruitful collaborations with the CEDAW Committee and the World Health Organisation in Geneva, not to mention the Commission on the Status of Women in New York. Our organisation and our members will continue to support their remarkable work in any way we can.

Our representatives at UNESCO are active ambassadors for our 90,000 members. They act as a global voice for women, transmitting the information they received about challenges faced by women in different countries.

I am, of course, also absolutely delighted to be at UNESCO today and to extend the collaboration of Soroptimists with international bodies one step further, for our mutual benefit.

Appeal

Before I finish, I must just say that while civil society actions are powerful and necessary and can set solid, meaningful and even inspiring precedents, government action cannot be bypassed. The experience of Soroptimists around world in the area of education compels us to call on – and remind – governments to:

- At minimum, fulfil existing obligations in international treaties and agreements relating to equal access to education.
- In the lead up to the MDG deadline next year, prioritise quality education for women and children throughout their lifespan as a necessary foundation for the achievement of all development goals – and make sure access to quality education for women and girls is upheld beyond 2015.
- Pledge to work towards policies and programmes with a life-course approach to education, recognising and understanding that access to learning is a human right at all ages, and that women and children have different learning needs at different times in their lives.

I thank you for your attention.