**Today it is my pleasure to extend an invitation to all of you! We are going on a road trip.** Our Soroptimist journey over the last 98 years has taken us into 122 countries to transform the lives of women and girls. Today I want to share where our travels can take us if we all get on board the bus and travel together to our 100th Anniversary. As we travel there are many more friends to make as we advance the human rights and Equality of women and girls through empowerment and education. On October 1, 2019 I am asking all Soroptimists to please join me on this 2-year journey.

**What do you need to bring?**

Bring your open minds and be prepared to understand & talk about adversity, resilience and progress.

Bring your hearts to show how much Soroptimists care.

Bring your voices to turn up the volume on our Global Voice.

Bring your passion since stories are best shared with energy & enthusiasm.

And of course, bring your purses as spending money to keep the bus running will surely make our trip a success as we come to places on the road where women and girls who are the furthest behind will have a chance to catch the bus.

**Where are we going?**

To quote UN Secretary General, Mr. Antonio Guterres “Achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls is the “unfinished business of our time, and the greatest human rights challenge in our world”.

Next year will mark 75 years since the founding of the United Nations, and women and girls are still denied human rights, often simply because of their gender. In 1948 we had the Declaration of Human Rights saying all persons are equal. In 1979 CEDAW was agreed and is considered the Bill of Rights for Women. In 1995 the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted and is considered the most progressive blueprint for advancing women’s rights. In 2015 the 2030 Agenda was launched; a shared global vision for sustainable development where Member States pledged that no one will be left behind and to endeavour to reach the furthest behind first and while some progress has been made, there are still so many disparities.

Women and girls represent half the world’s population and therefore, half of its potential. But the road is long, and we have many miles to travel to achieve full equality of rights and opportunities. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to end the multiple forms of gender violence and secure equal access to quality education and health, economic resources and participation in leadership, decision making and political life. So please join me and bring your friends on this road trip as we travel: “The Road to Equality” the focus of the Presidents Appeal for the next 2 years.

 On this Road to Equality we want to use seminars, webinars, networking partnerships, our networks of neighbours, friends and family and our lived experiences to turn up the volume on the Rights of Women and Girls.

To ensure the sustainability of our organization we need to come together globally and locally to work on the complex problems that are creating turmoil in our world. We need to work with others. We need to fight the pushback. We need to celebrate the perseverance of those who have overcome adversity for they are the ones that can rise and tell their stories. Let’s change the narrative to show the benefits of equality and not spend time debating which issue is the most important. Gender Equality is a cross cutting issue and women and girls are at the centre.

We will target some of the worst causes of inequality and learn the root causes, hear stories from those who are in the “fight” for change and develop our voices to become advocates. Change comes when enough people are talking and if you know the topic and you tell one person and they tell one person and they tell one person until so many are talking about something it cannot be ignored. We have eager Soroptimist members who want to tell you their stories after being impacted by the issues we will bring to the appeal. We have global friends we work with; we have UN Reps who follow these issues and we have Position papers called Where We Stand that align with each chosen topic and most importantly, we have you and all your friends to talk the talk.

Depending on your generosity and our fundraising skills, we will select up to 5 topics for project work and apply funding to support each to bring us best practices that showcase the impact and share the stories that will supplement our Soroptimist advocacy initiatives.

Topics may include FGM, Child and Forced Marriage, the Rights of Older Women, Domestic Violence, Modern Day Slavery and Migration.

Since we know only too well that Soroptimists like to hear about action on the ground, I am pleased to say that today I will share Topic #1 and the proposed accompanying project.

On the Road to Equality I want us to learn why Female Genital Mutilation must end and introduce you to those who are having great success in doing just that. It might surprise you to learn that the practice is still hidden in many societies, while in others they are beginning to see the practice banned and still other countries where it is growing. Canada is one of those countries where the practice is growing likely due to migration/immigration. I am in discussions with several organizations that are having great success in reaching both political and religious leaders by using massive media campaigns combined with local activists who are having great success with mothers to stop cutting their girls. On the road to equality an adolescent girl should not need to have her genitals cut with a razor blade whether it is a prick, a snip or a full cutting where she risks bleeding to death or suffering from lifelong trauma from the experience. How can she be a successful student and achieve her potential after such a ritual? Why is it necessary? Is it simply because that is the way it has always been?

Meet the Global Media Campaign to End FGM. The Global Media Campaign is a web of 375 media activists across 7 countries broadcasting directly to their communities where girls are cut. This new generation of digitally literate young campaigners on the ground are best placed to end FGM in their communities. And, with relatively modest support, they can and are making significant change. After national media campaigns; people are talking out loud about FGM, leaders are banning FGM and mothers are making the decision to no longer cut their daughters. After the first campaign evidence confirmed 1 in 4 mothers have responded declaring they will no longer cut their girls.

On the Road to Equality I want us to join the conversation about Forced Child Marriage and the plight of young girls who lose their rights when forced to marry an older man, entering a life of hard work because of being married young and therefore denied an education. We are already members in Girls Not Brides and will report a project in this space shortly.

On the Road to Equality I want us to learn about the Rights of Older Women, invisible women with no voice, often isolated and with no social protection and need our help to secure their rights. Only recently are these women even being counted in statistics. Women over 50 are just as relevant as women under 50. Look around this room and try and tell me we are not relevant!

On the Road to Equality I want us to lend a voice for women and girls who have been forced to migrate and find they are experiencing new and harsh realities on their journey to an unknown future.

On the Road to Equality the impact of Gender Based Violence including Modern Day Slavery & Domestic Violence must be in the conversation.

 And on the Road to Equality I want us to honor and check in on the work we have done in in the past because in those places along the road we already have many friends.

Many projects undertaken by our clubs around the world have supported women and girls in overcoming tremendous adversity. This is the life blood of the Soroptimist organization. However, just as important is creating conversations with neighbours, friends and families that allow women and girls to tell their stories as they become respected advocates and find their way into leadership and decision-making circles. Soroptimist International is committed to advocacy and being a Global Voice for Women and to be effective advocates for those who are being left behind we need to learn why they are there in the first place.

**Who is coming on this trip?**

The SI Board has now approved the trip and will work with us along the way by providing support from our Global Executive Director, Deborah Thomas and our Communications Manager, Sarah Wilkin and our Treasurer, Kathy King.

Sharon will certainly be there at the front of the bus but will be joined by a committee that includes our International Director of Advocacy, Bev Bucur, 4 Federation representatives, and not one but 2 Appeal coordinators. Now let me tell you a bit about them. You wanted to have younger members! They will bring this trip to life through stories and pictures while managing the appeal. Ayushi Kundu is from India and holds a law degree where she has worked on human rights cases. She joined us at CSW and found her way on to Youth panels and finds every opportunity to serve Soroptimist. Her co-coordinator is Olga Sidenko from Switzerland via the Ukraine. Olga holds her masters in accounting and after a 10-year career in International Trade and Finance moved to Switzerland where she has worked in the area of migration and asylum. She now has her own practice helping Eastern European clients. Communications are about to take on new meaning with these social media savvy coordinators.

However, the most important people on this trip is all of you. We will bring along the SIE members who are Standing up for Women and Girls, our SIGBI members who have been Thinking on It, our SWP members who Embrace, Create and Prosper and of course everyone in SIA who are committed to women and girls living their dreams. Together it can be an amazing journey.

Please don’t make us beg too hard for your support! Make our new leaders proud and show them your support.

Follow updates at [www.soroptimistinternational.org](http://www.soroptimistinternational.org). Materials will be available for downloading from the website.

And wherever you will be in October 2021 just imagine the celebration we can have!