

SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL WHERE WE STAND**Economic Empowerment of Women and Girls****Where Things Stand**

The current 2020 COVID – 19 pandemic has resulted in a pronounced impact on the working lives of women. In many countries workers have been asked to stay at home and if possible work remotely from home. This is not always possible especially for women who contribute to what is known as the informal economy.

The ILO estimated a 60 per cent decline in the earnings of the almost 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy in the first month of the crisis, the majority of whom are women. They include family carers, domestic and agricultural workers, support staff such as cleaners, general assistants, and workers in family businesses. These workers are simply not able to work remotely and face the impossible choice of risking life or livelihood.

In addition, it has become clear, as a result of the pandemic, that many roles which have in the past been defined as unskilled are now recognised as vital to maintaining, amongst others, the running of health, education, retail, and food supply sectors. These have traditionally been roles filled by women and have been low paid, but this must now be reassessed. These workers make up the poorest in the workforce and in many countries are not covered by government rescue packages or social protection schemes and thus sink further into poverty.

During this pandemic period, technology has started to play a major part, yet has accentuated the gender digital divide including impacting on access to on- line education and training as well as work. As recent reports have shown, women and girls were already lagging behind (OECD Bridging The Digital Gender Divide 2019). The Internet, digital platforms, mobile phones and digital financial services offer “leapfrog” opportunities for all and can help bridge the divide by giving women and girls the possibility to earn additional income, increase their employment opportunities, and access knowledge and general information related to work. (<http://www.oecd.org/internet/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf>). The OECD noted before the pandemic struck that “The road ahead is uphill: today worldwide some 327 million fewer women than men have a smartphone and can access the mobile Internet. Women are under-represented in ICT jobs, top management and academic careers and men are four times more likely than women to be ICT specialists”.

There is still a long way to go to recognise the role for women in leadership in all sectors of the economy from community leadership to the involvement of women on the Boards of major corporate companies. Cultural attitudes in many communities mean that women are unable to hold local leadership roles, while at corporate Board level there is still a massive gender gap.

Women remain disproportionately affected by poverty, hunger, the lack of health care, housing, water, sanitation, transportation and energy and are over-represented in the informal and unskilled economies. Economic empowerment, education and training, gender budgeting, and equal distribution of resources and services are critical to the advancement of women, the achievement of gender equality, and the realisation of women’s human rights. The lack of land rights negatively affects the ability of women to continue much of the agricultural work which they undertake and undermines their input to improving the economic position of their families and communities. Although SI recognises the flawed nature of the world’s dependence on GDP figures, investing in

women in all their diversities and empowering them economically does have a positive ripple effect on local, national, and international economies.

And Where Things Need To Go

Fundamental Action

- Ratify and implement the International Labour Organization's four key gender equality Conventions: the Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100), Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No. 111), Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (No. 156) and Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183);
- ensure equal representation at all levels in economic decision-making and the formation of financial policies;
- enact and enforce legislation to guarantee the rights of women and men to equal pay for equal work or work of equal value;
- set national employment policies which promote the harmonisation of work and family responsibilities for women whilst encouraging men to take on more domestic work;
- remove with immediate effect any legal obstacles and facilitate women's access to productive resources, including but not limited to land, credit, capital, property, and inheritance;
- enact robust legislation to eliminate all forms of gender based discrimination and harassment in the workplace (CEDAW);
- engage in gender-responsive budgeting to analyse, plan, implement, and monitor income and expenditure to more equally distribute resources.

Additional Action

- Stronger encouragement needs to be given to women and girls to reduce the digital gender divide and further Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) education and training. Women and girls should have equal access to affordable electricity, the Internet, mobile phones and computers.
- support the initiatives of governments, United Nations' bodies, the World Bank, specific companies and civil society organisations that promote economic opportunities and leadership for women;
- actively advocate for equal representation of women in economic decision making in all local, national, and global agencies and boards;
- encourage the measurement, quantification, and recognition of currently unremunerated domestic and care activities of women;
- provide equal access to quality education programmes, employment training, and opportunities to acquire vocational skills in all fields of employment including emerging

technologies and businesses for all women and girls in order to secure sustainable livelihoods;

- provide social protection measures which enable women to take maternity leave or appropriate sick leave.

Where Soroptimist International Stands

These are the principles that Soroptimist International strongly supports and will advocate for on behalf of Women and Girls:

- employ **education** to end occupational segregation and increase women's access to formal economies by offering skills based and vocational training to the diversity of women and girls of all ages especially across all aspects of science and technology;
- **empower** women and girls by giving them the tools, resources, and knowledge to actively participate in financial and all aspects of decision-making at household, community, national, and international levels including training them to assume leadership positions in all areas of economic, political, social and educational development;
- **enable opportunities** by raising awareness and understanding of the positive long term impact of investing in women and girls in all their diversities.