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Population and sustainable development, in particular sustained and inclusive economic growth**Statement submitted by Soroptimist International, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council¹**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

¹ The present statement is issued without formal editing.

Eradicating Gender Inequality in the Workplace

Soroptimist International presents this statement on behalf of its members active in 122 countries who work to transform the lives of women and girls in all their diversity in their communities. We see the challenges facing inclusive and sustainable economic growth everyday. To solve these problems countries, businesses, and development agencies must act now. We need system-wide change to ensure all women and girls everywhere can participate in the world of work as empowered equals.

Economies must be human centred to achieve sustainable development. This means that economic measures, programmes, and outcomes should only be considered successful if they contribute to improving the well-being of all people. Economies must be human rights focused, and workplaces must ensure their practices meet and enable human rights standards, including gender equality. Economies cannot be considered separately from sustainable development. Successful economies will address the interconnections between all three pillars of sustainable development — the social and environmental pillars, as well as economic pillar. It is impossible to talk about sustained and inclusive economic growth without addressing climate change and its impacts.

Economies and economic practices must be gender-transformative to achieve gender equality. All women and girls, particularly those who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and violence, are consistently and economically disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts. Economic impacts during COVID-19 has regressed gender equality. Post-covid, currently, it will take 267 years to close the economic gender gap. In many countries the gender pay gap has widened. Women left work in significant numbers because of caring responsibilities or working in informal sectors — in low-income countries 92% of women work in the informal sector. During the pandemic, an ongoing shadow pandemic of gender-based violence has been well documented worldwide. Many women and girls have experienced violence, harassment or abuse in the workplace, at home and in communities. Others were forced to work and live in unsafe environments. Ultimately, women and girls are facing higher risks of multidimensional and intergenerational poverty, and increased barriers to re-entering education, training and work. Young women, unable to secure their future, will live with varied impacts of COVID-19 for years. This is unacceptable. To achieve sustained and inclusive economic growth immediate action must be taken.

To address economic inequality faced by all women and girls, we must acknowledge and confront the multifaceted causes for that inequality. States must introduce better policies and protections that enable women to be equal participants, leaders and decision makers in sustainable economies. Over the past forty years states have promised to do this, but implementation and action has been severely lacking. There is no longer time for excuses. With widening gender gaps states must act now.

Businesses and employers must create and implement policies and measures that promote women's inclusion at all levels in the workplace by implementing the Women's Empowerment Principals. The financial sector must adjust services to reflect the financial needs and realities of all women and girls, including those starting their own businesses. All barriers to women being able to access services and resources, including the right to control, own, pass on and inherit property must be abolished. Banking services must be widened so women can access credit, loans and other financial services, including in rural areas, so they can start and manage their businesses. Financial education should be provided, enabling women to start businesses. That young women are more than twice as likely than young men to not be in employment, education or training, shows that their transformative potential is untapped. Women entrepreneurs and women-run enterprises must be encouraged by providing incentives and ensuring financial inclusion.

To fully assess the economic challenges facing women and girls in all their diversity, we need comprehensive qualitative and quantitative data that spans the entire life course. This means going beyond household data surveys, which hides inequalities within families, and collecting data for women and girls younger than 15 and older than 49. Only collecting data on this age group is unacceptable and erases the existence of many women.

Preparing for the world of work

Workplaces are changing, and the expectations of women and girls in all their diversity in the workforce are changing too. Education and training at all levels remain transformative tools that enable and empower girls and women throughout the life course. For educational opportunities to translate into sustainable economic outcomes, there must be a joined-up approach across policy areas, ensuring women and girls will be equal participants and leaders in the economic sphere.

Education and training opportunities must be expanded, and additional support given to girls to return to school, and women to return to work and/or education to learn new skills. This is critical after COVID-19, as during the pandemic, financial pressures and caring responsibilities meant that many girls and women left education, training and work. Scholarships, informal education, retraining opportunities, and other programmes all promote women's economic empowerment. New educational and training opportunities must ensure girls and women are equipped and qualified for work with new technologies and in green economies.

Specific efforts must be made to identify all women and girls missing education, including displaced people and migrants, 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.

Creating diverse, sustainable economies

For economies and workplaces to support sustainable development they must be rooted in human rights and equality. This requires workplaces to embrace diversity. For too long work practices marginalised people. Now, work patterns and environments must adjust to ensure those with disabilities, older people, rural and indigenous women, women in all their diversity, and other diverse groups are equal participants and leaders in the world of work.

Workplaces must become more inclusive by hiring diverse employees, addressing implicit and explicit biases including gender biases, improving accessibility, eradicating workplace violence and harassment, facilitating flexible working practices, making work environments safer, paying a living wage, equal pay for work of equal value, and offering opportunities and support for advancement, including training opportunities.

Women earning less throughout their career creates a gender pension gap, leaving older women at increased risks of poverty. With women living longer, they lack the financial resources to last their lifetime and cannot retire at a time of their choosing. Immediate steps must be taken to rectify these issues.

Introducing new business policies and practices, including the introduction of quotas, will have a vital role to play in diversifying workplaces, however, these changes have taken too long. States' introduction and enforcement of national and international legislation must accelerate progress; legal protections to ensure that workplaces put employees first must be implemented.

Challenging traditional gender roles

Today, many people shape their lives around careers and the demands and needs of employers. Women in all their diversity must be free to make their own choices on careers, having children, work-life balance, or getting involved as leaders in their communities. Unfortunately, workplace policies and practices greatly impact how

people, and particularly women, make those choices. Workplace policies must be flexible, adaptable and accessible to maximise options for women.

Parental and maternity leave, childcare costs and availability, sexual and reproductive rights and healthcare including maternal healthcare, prenatal & postnatal healthcare, and social protection systems, all impact women's ability to stay in work or girls' staying in education. Frequently, women leaving work when they have children is more cost effective than staying in work and paying for childcare. There are countries without maternity or parental leave protections. The impacts of these policy failures should be considered a crisis which significantly contributes to the economic gender gap.

As sustainable development is founded on equality and human rights, women's choices must be respected and facilitated. Women's reproductive rights and choices must be respected. Women should not be coerced by politics to make health, reproductive or other significant decisions.

Soroptimist International's recommendations:

- That gender-transformative and human rights-based approaches are used across economic, environmental, and social programmes to best support the development of sustainable economies that contribute to achieving gender equality.
- The human rights outcomes of sustainable development programmes should be used for monitoring and evaluation. Progress measured by qualitative and quantitative measures for human rights must be used as markers of success.
- Expand and enhance economic opportunities for all women and girls through well-planned programmes that respond to community needs. An environmental dimension should be built into economic programmes, particularly those targeted at the economic empowerment of women and girls in all their diversity.
- Introduce and enforce laws that ensure women receive equal pay for work of equal value, and receive a living wage.
- Elaborate on laws to protect women working in informal sectors. All International Labour Organisation member states must ratify Convention 190 as part of their gender equality efforts.
- Further develop capacities for disaggregated data collection, interpretation and analysis, including creating new qualitative indicators and collecting data on women and girls in all their diversity throughout their life course. Qualitative data reflects nuanced realities that quantitative data cannot. We cannot only collect narrow facts about women and girls in all their diversity, but instead must respond to their reports about their lived realities.
- Expand education and training opportunities for all women and girls, ensuring access to all levels of education throughout their life course. All people have a right to education to fill gaps in their essential education to at least secondary (vocational) level, and have retraining opportunities to maximise economic opportunity and sustainability.
- Companies should be informed on and motivate to adapt the women empowerment principles. This includes ensuring adequate WASH facilities at the workplace.
- Childcare policies and care of vulnerable adults must be reformed so all women who want to work can. Services must be free or affordable.

- Technology and internet access must be increased through international cooperation to improve infrastructure. Technologies including mobile phones must be affordable to enable women's economic participation and leadership.
- All women and girls must have access to family planning, high-quality maternal, prenatal and postnatal health services, including in rural areas.
- Innovations must be found to expand and improve upon sexual and reproductive healthcare and education. This includes adjusting programmes to ensure girls and women receive information they need, and redeveloping programmes so they are accessible and respond to the realities and future needs of women and girls. High-quality sexual and reproductive healthcare must be universally available and health programmes should be examined and expanded to ensure that they are not discriminatory on any grounds.

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