

2022– 2023 Biennium

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SI Where We Stand Statement
Defending Women’s Rights Against
Global Suppression of their Voices

Where Things Stand...

For many years there have been international resolutions, agreements and declarations from countries around the world to uphold and work for the equality and equity of women and girls with men and boys. In 2015 SDG 5 clearly set out the aim for United Nations Member States to ‘achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’ indicating the targets which will enable this to be achieved. Long before this with the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, UN Member States had confirmed the agreements reached in the Vienna World Conference 1993 that “All human rights – civil, cultural, economic, political and social including the right to development – are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated”

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women Convention (CEDAW), through its 189 States parties signatories and the countless activists, civil society organizations and regional organizations, supporting its implementation, has become a leading force in ensuring the promotion, protection, and fulfillment of the powerful message of the Beijing Conference, "Women's rights are human rights". The Convention offers a unique legally binding and human rights-based foundation for furthering the full implementation of the Beijing Platform For Action, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Women Peace and Security agenda mandated by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000; UNSCR 1325). Furthermore, the work of the CEDAW Committee has been crucial in strengthening the accountability of States parties in accelerating the implementation of these political commitments and laid a solid legal foundation to ensure their mutual reinforcement.

And yet in recent years, women and girls have found their human rights being eroded, their voices of protest suppressed and in some cases brutally silenced. Human rights protesters, activists and defenders have been subjected to assault, other forms of violence including torture and, in some reported cases, have even been killed.

Regrettably in an increasing number of countries 'Governments are ignoring international law and agreements which they have previously committed to. This has led to an ongoing effort to remove human rights such as the freedom of expression, whether individually or collectively, from being exercised by women and girls. Removal of equal access to quality and affordable education, social protection, various aspects of health care, recognition of legal rights which have previously ensured so that women and girls can contribute to their families, communities and the development of their countries is unacceptable. To enforce this with aggression and violence cannot be tolerated.

The NGO 2022 Open Letter to Permanent Representatives to the United Nations in advance of the annual UN Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security states:

“This year’s annual Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) will take place in a world marked by escalating and widespread conflict, flagrant attacks on women’s bodily autonomy and other fundamental human rights, fraying multilateralism, and a deeply divided Security Council.”

The letter cites examples of contraventions of international law and women’s human rights in several countries including Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Syria, Myanmar, Sudan, Columbia, Palestine, Yemen but there are many other examples which illustrate State violence against women and girls as well as the repression of women and girls’ other human rights in other countries. These include the suppression of views in relation to sexual and reproductive health rights, particularly in relation to abortion and the aggressive silencing of voices raised in what is seen as opposition to Government imposition of laws contrary to the interests of women and girls for example attire, gender- violence toward those who attempt to exercise their right to right to freedom of expression, to hold opinions without interference, the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, the right to freedom of religion or belief , the right to privacy and the right to an education which permits the development of critical thinking. Although many incidents have been reported in the international media and through social media, these incidents are often strenuously denied by the relevant Government.

The 2022 G7 leaders’ statement on resilient democracies and their commitment to work with civil society and other partners improved on their open societies statement in the previous year because it has increased the prominence of civic society space in the statement with more detail enabling a robust accountability to civil society organisations and NGOs.

The 2022 G7 Resilient Democracies Statement began with a strong commitment:

“ We, the Leaders of Germany, Argentina, Canada, France, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Senegal, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and the European Union, affirm our commitment to strengthening the resilience of our democracies and to working towards equitable, inclusive and sustainable solutions to global challenges, including climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, and reaffirm our commitment to the rules-based international order.”

On August 15,2022, States issued the Ministerial Declaration of the High Level Segment of the 2022 session of the Economic and Social Council and the 2022 high-level political forum on sustainable development. It issued the following commitment:

“We reaffirm the universality of the 2030 Agenda and its comprehensive, far-reaching, people-centered and transformative set of Sustainable Development Goals and targets, guided by the principle of leaving no one behind. We wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. The Goals are indivisible, integrated and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental. We reaffirm that the 2030 Agenda and its Goals seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls” (Ibid Para 6)

And Where Things Need to Go...

Soroptimist International and other Civil society partners believe that freedom of speech is fundamental to the implementation of the UN Declaration of Human Rights and all the consequent resolutions and agreements.

Soroptimist International urges all countries to remain committed to accelerating the achievement of the SDGs and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda especially the empowerment of women and girls.

Soroptimist International knows that societies that protect and promote the human rights of all women and girls and empower them economically and politically are more stable, peaceful, equal and prosperous. Women must be empowered to make their own choices and decide their own future, which is central to reaching their full potential, realizing gender equality and achieving sustainable development.

Soroptimist International knows that women and girls lift up their communities and that stronger societies cannot be built without the full, equal and meaningful participation of women and girls who make up almost 50% of the global population- across all levels of decision-making and leadership. The Ministerial Declaration of the High-level segment of the 2022 Session of the Economic and Social Council and the 2022 high-level political forum (ibid paragraph 40) agreed with this assessment. States reaffirmed that all women and girls play a vital role as agents of change for sustainable development or as observed by an Afghan adage they “hold up half the sky.” As such, States concluded that: “Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and women’s full, equal, effective and meaningful participation, leadership and decision-making at all levels and in all sectors, are essential for achieving sustainable development” is correct and must be implemented on an urgent basis. This means that women should be listened to and their views respected especially in relation to their own bodies and their own futures enabling them to ensure the development and progress of future generations.

Fundamental Action

Freedom of expression and opinion, to hold opinions without interference, the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, the right to freedom of religion or belief, the right to privacy and the right to an education, in person, online and offline is imperative alongside ensuring a free and independent media through which views can be expressed.

All Member States of the United Nations should implement the international agreements which enable a diversity of viewpoints to be heard and for representatives of civil society, especially women human rights protesters and defenders, to voice an opposing view to that of the State or the corporation.

All Member States should ratify relevant treaties and incorporate into national law protections for the implantation of gender equality and the elimination of violence against women and girls.

Further Action Required...

Law enforcement agencies at State, Regional or local level should be investigated and held to account where there are allegations of any attempts to silence women or girls in any manner including brutality and aggression against women and girls peacefully protesting to uphold their legal rights.

Where Soroptimist International Stands...

These are the principles that Soroptimist International strongly supports and will advocate for on behalf of all Women and girls to ensure their voices are heard and respected:

To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action it is critical that all UN Member States uphold international human rights for all, especially those enshrined in international laws and agreements,

SI will continue to advocate for human rights protestors and defenders and especially for the protection of those women,

SI will work with all partners to hold Governments to account for violation of international laws and agreements as they impact on women and girls.

Resources

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action UN Women 1995

UN Sustainable Development Goals 2015 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Cross-regional joint statement by 71 countries at the UN Third Committee

G7 2022 Resilient Democracies Statement

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/57544/2022-06-27-g7-resilient-democracies-statement-data>

SI Position Statement on Human Rights Defenders

October 2022