Where We Stand Position Paper: Economic Empowerment

Revised December 2023

Position Summary:

- Disproportionate numbers of women and girls are living in poverty compared to men;
- Unpaid care work (care economy) and the gender digital divide are among the social factors contributing to women and girl's underrepresentation in paid employment;
- Education is a vehicle towards achieving economic empowerment by enabling opportunities.

Where Things Stand:

According to UN Women, an estimated 388 million women and girls were living in poverty in 2022. The highest concentrations of women living in extreme poverty live in Sub-Saharan Africa (244 million) and Central and Southern Asia (81 million).

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many roles which have, in the past, been defined as 'unskilled' are now recognised as vital to maintaining, among others, the running of health, education, retail, and food supply sectors including agriculture. These have traditionally been roles filled by women and have largely been low paid. However, 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.

Care work has also traditionally been categorised as a 'women's' job, which has perpetuated systemic social, cultural, and therefore, economic barriers for women and girls worldwide. Specifically, unpaid care work remains a significant challenge for all women and girls who continue to act as primary caregivers of children and families, especially given that the care economy is growing in line with the increased demand for childcare and care for the elderly in regions across the world. It is estimated that 606 million women are outside the labour market because of their unpaid care responsibilities.

The persisting care crisis is a gender crisis that hampers positive social development and any progress towards gender equality. Gendered patterns of women's inability to access pensions often stems from their exclusion from waged work throughout their

life course, including unpaid care work. Inclusive parenting policies, such as paid parental leave for both parents, is an essential first step to tackling the care crisis.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, workers in the 'formal' economy – meaning that the work is regulated by government authorities, particularly in the areas of contract and company law and taxation – has seen an overwhelming shift to online work. This also holds true for many educational establishments, including schools and universities.

While the shift to online working and learning can offer more flexibility, those most negatively impacted by this shift have been women and girls, due to their lack of access to the internet, digital technologies, and digital financial services. This is known as the gender digital divide. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) noted before the pandemic struck that 327 million fewer women than men have a smartphone and can access the internet. The report went on to highlight that women remain under-represented in ICT jobs, top management and academic careers, and men are four times more likely than women to become ICT specialists. According to the OECD, equal access to technology and the internet can provide "leapfrog" opportunities for all and can help to bridge this gender digital divide by enabling and empowering all women and girls to earn an additional income, increase their employment opportunities, and access knowledge and general information related to their work.

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. 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 an even bigger gender gap. Workplaces must be safe, enabling and empowering spaces for all workers, including women at all job levels. All measures must be taken to ensure places of work are free from all forms of violence as per the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 190.

Although Soroptimist International recognises the flawed nature of the world's dependence on GDP figures, investing in all women and empowering them economically does have a positive ripple effect on local, national, and international economies.

Where things need to go...

Equal pay for work of equal value must be implemented without reservation. Bridging the persisting gender pay gap – which continues to unfairly impact women and girls - is essential to tackling deeply rooted gender inequalities in the workplace and widespread, systemic misogyny.

States must adopt inclusive strategies to recognise, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work. They must allocate resources to respond to the growing need for childcare and care for older persons. In addition, care work must be viewed as a shared role for caregivers in every context.

In this digital age, access to the internet and digital technologies is a necessity, but this is dependent upon having (affordable) access to electricity. The digital gender divide must be bridged through increased government investment in national electricity grids, access and affordability of networks, digital technologies, digital literacy training and lifelong learning for all women and girls. Fully funded programmes must be implemented to expand all women and girls' participation in science, technology, engineering, the arts and math (STEAM) to reach gender parity and equal opportunities to work in the field. High priority should be placed on those at risk of being left behind.

Fundamental Action:

- All States should ratify and implement the ILO's four key gender equality Conventions:

    1. Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100);
    2. Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No. 111);
    3. Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (No. 156); and
    4. Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183).

- Ratify ILO Convention 190 on the elimination of violence in the world of work, to promote access to education, training and careers for all women and girls;

- All States and stakeholders must honour their obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms Against Women (CEDAW), including by adapting their national laws;

- Ensure gender 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 work of equal value by establishing non-discriminatory liveable wages throughout the life course to bridge the gender pay gap;

- Recognise care as a societal responsibility and adopt inclusive strategies to shift resources to respond to the growing need for childcare and care for older persons;

- Remove with immediate effect any and all legal obstacles and facilitate women's access to productive resources, including but not limited to land, credit, capital, property, and inheritance; and

- 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 all women and girls to reduce the gender digital divide and further STEAM education and training. All women and girls should have equal access to affordable electricity and mobile technology;

- Support the initiatives of governments, United Nations' bodies, the World Bank, civil society organisations and specific companies that promote economic opportunities and leadership for all women;

- Actively advocate for equal representation of women in economic decision making in all local, national, and global agencies and boards;

- Prioritise 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; and

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

Where Soroptimist International Stands:

The following principles form the cornerstone of Soroptimist International's position on the economic empowerment of all 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 STEAM;

- **Empower** all 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; and

- **Enable** opportunities by raising awareness and understanding of the positive long-term impact of investing in all women and girls.

Sources:

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