Where We Stand Position Paper: Poverty

Revised December 2023

Position Summary:

- Disproportionate numbers of women and girls are living in extreme poverty globally due to persisting social, cultural and economic barriers;
- An integrated, gender-sensitive, and human-rights centred approach to all policy and legislation is essential to ensure that all women and children living in poverty and other vulnerable situations benefit from inclusive economic growth and development.

Where Things Stand:

As stated in the Report of the United Nations Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls, presented to the United Nations Human Rights Council in April 2023, "poverty is more than the outcome of a lack of income or wealth. It is the result of a blatant systemic failure leading to a vicious cycle of exclusion and discrimination that violates the civil, cultural, economic, environmental, political and social rights of both present and future generations".

In 2022, an estimated 388 million women and girls were living in extreme poverty (1 in every 10 women), compared with 372 million men and boys. This equates to more than 700 million people – or 10% of the global population – that are surviving on less than USD 1.90 per day. The intersection of social, economic, climate, and legal inequalities imposes the heaviest penalties on women and girls.

Wealth and income inequalities – including the gender pay gap – have continued to increase both within and between countries and disproportionately impact women and girls, contributing to increasing levels of poverty. Gendered income poverty is a real issue that can have catastrophic implications to the health, wellbeing and status of all women and girls, including older women. In a context of gendered labour markets, contributory pension systems face challenges to guarantee universal and adequate pension benefits for women. Over their life course, women spend more time dedicated to caregiving, lower labour market participation, more part-time work and lower earnings than men. These components compromise their pension entitlements in pension systems that link benefits to paid work, contributions and earnings. In addition, 763 million globally – 67% of whom are women – still cannot read or write.

According to UNESCO, the literacy gender gap is the result of unequal access to basic education. In today's digital era, women and girls continue to fall behind as they lack digital literacy skills on top of basic literacy skills, which in turn impedes their ability to undertake many forms of paid work.

Last, research has highlighted that unless climate change is curbed, it will drive up to 130 million more people into poverty in the next decade and displace up to 3 billion people by the end of this century. Climate migrants face heightened barriers to accessing basic healthcare, safe water and sanitation, education, food security and shelter. In addition, all women and girls face accentuated risks of gender-based violence, trafficking, and child, early and forced marriage and unions, placing them in particularly vulnerable situations.

Where things need to go...

A disconnected approach to social, economic and environmental policies has not produced the desired results towards poverty eradication and reducing inequality. Policies on economic, social and environmental development should therefore be interconnected to ensure that people, in particular women and children living in poverty and other vulnerable situations, benefit from inclusive economic growth and development. Crucially, all policies and legislation must hold gender inclusivity and human rights at their core to ensure equal protection for all, in accordance with international law and human rights treaties including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Achieving zero poverty for all women and girls by 2030 will therefore require simultaneous action on long-standing gender disparities, including in access to land, healthcare and family planning, education, and the labour market.

The digital gender divide must be bridged through increased government investment in national electricity grids, accessible and affordable 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.

Social protection system floors must be implemented to ensure basic income throughout the life course, including at pension age. States are required to ensure that all women and girls have fair and equitable structures for lifelong contributions, including times when they are working as unpaid carers, to ensure financial security

throughout their life course. Social development policies must be underpinned by basic human rights that guarantee the full protection of women of all ages. When women and girls are included in social protection systems, they can positively contribute as part of the solution to achieving economic justice. A simulation analysis conducted by UN Women in 2022 demonstrated that an integrated policy approach – including more spending on social protection, investments in the green economy, better infrastructure and education – would lift close to 150 million women and girls out of poverty by 2030.

Empowering all women and girls to take a central role in developing innovative solutions is crucial to improving community responses to the climate crisis. This can be done by enhancing their participation, decision-making and leadership in climate change mitigation, adaptation and disaster risk reduction strategies. Gender-sensitive humanitarian relief is vital to ensure the wellbeing and dignity of all women and girls during and post-disaster.

Fundamental Action:

All States are urged to implement measures for all indicators to achieve United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 on No Poverty, with priority being given to:

- Apply gender-sensitive and human rights-based approaches to all policies, legislation, discussions and decisions related to all aspects of poverty eradication and development;

- Honour their obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms Against Women (CEDAW), including by adapting their national laws;

- Increase investments in quality education and lifelong learning, and create specific, targeted programmes, including on digital technology and STEAM subjects and careers, focused on enabling all women and girls into paid work, education and training;

- Adopt inclusive, universal healthcare via increased investments in quality healthcare provisions, staffing, training and community education programmes;

- Bridge the gender pay gap by providing equal pay for work of equal value between men and women and establishing non-discriminatory liveable wages, with the provision of accessible financial support and training to enable those who wish to develop entrepreneurial skills;

- Implement universal social protection system floors to alleviate poverty by ensuring that human rights are respected, protected and fulfilled;

- Measure and prioritise the wellbeing of all women and girls beyond GDP by deploying multidimensional indicators to ensure quality, disaggregated data collection;

- Fulfil legally binding commitments agreed upon in the 2015 Paris Agreement and further Declarations on climate action;

- Develop and implement legislation to ensure gender equality across ownership of land and other resources including but not limited to clean water; and

- Develop and implement policies to build gender-sensitive resilience in communities affected by natural and human-made disasters, including safe shelter and food security.

Additional Action:

- Increase the participation of all women and girls in all levels of education and training by ensuring safe, inclusive access to quality education and training programmes;

- Ensure that care work is recognised as a valued job and can contribute to pensions;

- Promote women's leadership and their full, effective and equal participation in decision-making;

- Invest in and strengthen social policies and programmes that provide necessary support and protection and empower all women and girls to take their equal place in communities;

- Provide universal quality health care, especially maternal health and childcare supported by appropriate education and information on sexual and reproductive health rights; and

- Ensure safe access to water and sanitation for homes, schools and workplaces. Involve women in community management of these facilities as a positive action to achieve sustainable development.

Where Soroptimist International Stands:

Soroptimist International recognises that rates of poverty globally have exponentially increased as a result of intersecting crises. We also recognise that all women and girls are among those impacted but poverty and gender inequality are not inevitable. Poverty and gender inequality are the result of structural discrimination which has been at the heart of law and policy for decades. In line with United Nations General Assembly Resolution 74/235, we must strive for justice through a gender lens which is inclusive of social justice, economic justice, climate justice and legal justice.

Soroptimist International understands that education plays a transformative role as a driver for sustainable development, peace, equality and social justice at large. Access to quality, lifelong education empowers and equips all women and girls with the essential skills required to access the labour force and develop self-sustaining futures.

To that end, Soroptimist International works to support the achievement of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through its programmes to educate, enable and empower all women and girls at the grassroots level, and by advocating on behalf of all women and girls, to demand that legislation and policies are in place to ensure that no one is left behind.

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