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Assessing the status of implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and its contribution to the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development during the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development

Statement submitted by Soroptimist International, a non-governmental organization in special 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.

Statement

Soroptimist International supports strongly the fundamental basis on which the Programme of Action is focussed with “a people-centred approach to population and development policies, grounded in the respect for human rights and a strong emphasis on environmental sustainability.”

Soroptimist International works to establish education and training for women and girls as a major contribution to achieving the goals of the Programme of Action. Soroptimist International recognises that access to quality education across the life course is a human right under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is central to the work of the United Nations for fulfilling both the overarching focus of Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5 and fundamental to the achievement of all 17 Goals, including as a major means for responding to the UN 2030 Agenda’s defining principle of ‘leaving no one behind’.

Despite continuous acknowledgement of the value of education to girls, women, their families and communities, we are still struggling to reach those furthest behind within marginalised and vulnerable sections of society around the world, striving to maintain school and college or university attendance and to ensure that all education is of a high quality as well as being freely accessible to all.

Beyond access, many of those in school are not acquiring the necessary societal building blocks of foundational literacy and numeracy, let alone creative, critical, technological and scientific thinking, with digital, social and emotional skills which enable women and girls to fulfil their potential.

It is widely acknowledged that as well as benefitting women and girls as individuals, educating women and girls produces better health and welfare outcomes, fuels economic growth, and ensures stable and peaceful societies thus contributing to development across the board.

Discussions over recent years have addressed some potentially difficult topics such as comprehensive sex education and family planning with many more women and girls, where previously these have been taboo subjects in many communities. However, it is also acknowledged that in many regions of the world there is a need for further appropriate, relevant and quality education and training across these fields to ensure the future health and welfare of women and girls, preventing for example female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage and offering women and girls choice over the decisions which intimately affect their bodies.

Soroptimist International believe that it is important for women and girls in local communities to be able to be empowered to lead on these issues as this takes account of local cultural and social norms in providing effective and informative education and training leading to change and development. Soroptimist International has enabled young women across communities in Kenya to successfully engage in a Leadership and Mentoring Camp. The outcomes from this include an increase in self-confidence for the young women concerned, with the ability and skills to lead projects in their own communities on their return, and cascading the education and training gained at the Camp. This involved information about dealing with gender-based violence, personal relationships as well as other issues of personal health.

The lack of information for youth about sexuality and the reproductive function penalises girls who do not know the consequences of sexual intercourse, whether they agree or not, and do not know how to prevent pregnancy and protect themselves from infections, including HIV. With regard to menstruation, the lack of instruction provided by schools and families prevents girls from properly

managing the cycle and hygiene is often lacking without appropriate clothing accessories, water, and access to sanitary facilities.

In Cambodia, Soroptimist International - in partnership with local women's organisations - work to identify the most marginalised groups of women and girls effectively reaching those furthest behind and identifying education and training programmes which contribute to community sustainable development. New visual materials to assist with breaking the barriers of high levels of illiteracy were developed including for maternal health programmes covering issues such as birth spacing and unwanted pregnancies.

In Malaysia an education programme was developed, known as the Teenage Survival Kit, that educates parents, carers, youth and teenagers on contemporary issues relating to sexual and mental health and relationships. With the support of partners an extensive curriculum was developed with young people contributing material and producing their own video to help others make decisions in their own lives.

Soroptimist International works continuously in a multitude of global wide projects and programmes, including its President's Appeal project *Opening Doors to a Bright Future*, to educate women and girls about their rights and provide the information needed to access appropriate sexual and reproductive health care, whilst also educating men and boys about the shared responsibility of child-bearing and other matters relating to sexuality and reproduction. We believe that projects such as these can be replicated in many places enabling women and girls to make decisions relating to their sexual and reproductive health free from discrimination by working within the wider community to raise awareness and increase understanding about these issues.

This approach was recognised during discussions in the Expert Group leading to this Commission on Population and Development. It was suggested that data was needed for evidence-based policies to make the best possible decisions; this is certainly what Soroptimist International have demonstrated over many years.

For many years Soroptimist International has urged Member States to recognise that the lack of disaggregated data impedes an understanding of those who are left behind, including their specific needs. This impacts frequently on services and provision made for women and girls, or lack of it as they become invisible. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals it is vital that the collection of disaggregated data is prioritised.

Soroptimist International supports the work of the Expert Group on the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action contributing to this Commission namely addressing four global demographic "megatrends" – population growth, population ageing, migration and urbanisation – and the implications of these trends for economic and social development and environmental sustainability, as well as on policy priorities for population and development over the next few decades.

The world has moved on since the frameworks of the Programme of Action and the Sustainable Development Goals were established. This review is timely in the light of the changes which have taken place. Mass migrations, both internally and across borders, have increased the vulnerability of many thousands of families, many most severely affected being women and girls. They are subject to sexual exploitation and trafficking as well as other forms of gender- based violence. Education

continues to offer a major platform of prevention and protection, raising awareness and ensuring women and girls are able to organise and lead within their new communities.

Soroptimist International urges all United Nations Member States to:

- Protect the human rights of women and girls and empower them to be leaders, experts and agents of change especially in their own communities; and
- Ensure that education and training is affordable, safe and accessible: poverty and economic disenfranchisement are not only outcomes of a lack of education, but they are significant factors in preventing women and girls from accessing education and training at all life stages.

Soroptimist International will continue to advocate to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action ensuring that women and girls are at the forefront of all development policies and programmes especially in education and training. It is critical that all United Nations Member States uphold international human rights for all, particularly those enshrined in international laws and agreements, to achieve the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the Programme of Action of the International Conference of Population and Development.
