CONFRONTING INEQUALITIES

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Soroptimist International

Report for the High-Level Political Forum 2021

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SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL

About This Report

After over a year of the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have watched their hard-won progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals go backwards. All women and girls have experienced the impacts of COVID-19 particularly acutely — women frontline workers and those in the informal economy were among those hit first and hit hardest. Women were often the first to face unemployment often due to care responsibilities. As lock downs spread across the world opportunities for women's work has shrunk, more women are living in poverty, rates of gender-based violence have increased, child marriage, teen pregnancy, as well as maternal and infant mortality rates have increased. Be it through paid and unpaid labour women and girls have to keep homes, communities and economies afloat while facing increased caring responsibilities at home.

Globally, we have witnessed a regression in gender equality and a return to a reliance upon gender stereotypes which harm individuals, families, communities, economies and countries. COVID-19 has revealed and entrenched the inequalities that exist in our world today. It will be impossible to overcome COVID-19 and achieve sustainable development without addressing these inequalities.

It was abundantly clear that the world was off-track to achieve the SDGs by 2030 well before the pandemic. Progress has been slowing on even well-established aims which pre-existed the Sustainable Development Goals. For example, despite good progress between 1995 and 2015 on poverty eradication, now SDG1, in recent years actions to lift people out of poverty are not having the same impact. This is more than simply a problem with "political will" — in reality, the cause of injustices and inequalities within countries and between countries is the direct result of deliberate and bad political choices, policies and laws. It is therefore important to recognise systematic discrimination and ill-designed policies are the root of many injustices and inequalities that were exposed during this pandemic. For example, poverty is man-made, and the result of deliberate policy choices, similar to the gender gap in salary, pension and living conditions.

SDG 10 on eradicating inequalities digs deep into the systemic barriers that prevent us from achieving the 2030 Agenda. There are multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that continuously create inequalities between and within countries down to the household level. The COVID-19 pandemic and its related crises has exposed and widened the gaps, inequalities and injustices that SI and other feminist and women's organizations have been working so hard to eliminate across the three pillars of sustainable development. All women and girls across the life course remain the most vulnerable and most likely to be left behind.

The COVID-19 vaccine distribution and vaccination crisis highlights the inequalities and further demonstrates the need to change systems that create inequalities between countries and people. It is not good enough to go back to normalcy — this 'normal' itself was the direct cause that made so many communities vulnerable, unequal and unjust, the time is now to be bold and take action to build forward better.

In this report, Soroptimist International will provide recommendations on how to expedite action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, by putting gender equality at the heart of all actions to progress sustainable development and combat COVID-19. The policy recommendations contained in this report will be presented alongside the projects carried out by Soroptimist International members in their own communities where they have the knowledge to best enact change. These Soroptimist grassroots projects build capacities within communities, promote women and girls as leaders and agents of change, and in the context of COVID-19 recovery, will ensure that we will have a more sustainable and equal world after the pandemic.

COVID-19 may have set us back, but during this decade of action, with ambition, increased political will, and full, effective, equal and meaningful collaboration with all stakeholders, it is still possible to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. This will require creating new and necessary policies and laws at the national, regional and international levels.

"People who have been pushed behind, and rendered powerless, by generations of discrimination, have systematically unequal access to services and opportunities … They are placed at a structural disadvantage when it comes to any threat."

— Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

About Soroptimist International

Soroptimist International (SI) is a global women's organisation that actively contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals through empowering women in their local communities to create their own transformative change. Active in over 3,000 communities across 122 countries worldwide, SI contributes to the achievement of gender equality through its aim to 'Educate, Empower and Enable' all women and girls. This year, we celebrate the 100 year anniversary of Soroptimist International. For 100 years Soroptimists have campaigned and worked to eradicate gender inequality — we should not need to work for 100 years more. Gender equality must and can be achieved by 2030.

The history of SI and its projects is intertwined with the work of the UN. When the UN was first created, Soroptimists were responding to the humanitarian impacts of war and in recognition of SI's community-based expertise SI has held consultative status with the UN since the 1950s. SI's UN Representatives have been present and active during UN milestones, including the Beijing Declaration, the Millennium Development Goals, UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the Paris Climate Agreement and the Migration Compact.

Today, SI UN Representatives are active in New York, Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi, Paris, Rome and Bangkok. Through the Major Groups and Other Stakeholders, SI joined other NGOs and civil society organisations in participating in the unprecedented global consultative processes that led to the creation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. Throughout that process SI joined the call for there to be a standalone goal on gender equality which was crosscutting for all other goals. Having achieved this aim, Soroptimists around the world are contributing to the achievement of all the Sustainable Development Goals through their global policy work at the UN and through the impact of their projects.

The Impact of COVID on the SDGs and Gender Equality

The disproportionate and gender unequal impacts of COVID-19 upon all women and girls was described by the UN Secretary General as a "shadow epidemic". These impacts are created and compounded by pre-existing discriminatory attitudes, processes and policies that harm women and girls in all their diversity, and rely on outdated and regressive gender stereotypes.

Many methods we have to combat COVID-19 are restricted to those with more resources or those from high socio-economic backgrounds. Lockdowns require that people having space to isolate — the homeless, those living in slums, shared housing, prisons, shelters or densely populated areas cannot access that space. Accessing work and education relies upon having access to computers, reliable electricity and frequently, family support. For many, especially women and girls, they do not have this access due to the digital divide or because the needs of men and boys are prioritised within the household. For others, particularly those in lower waged jobs, it is not possible to work from home due to the nature of the sector they work in. Women disproportionately work in low-paid, underpaid or unpaid jobs, or in the informal economy. For those working in the informal economy, their sector has collapsed, leaving many women without the support of relief schemes targeted at those who are formally employed and without access to other social protection floors including benefits. For those who have access to social protections, like pensions, there are frequently gender gaps, with women receiving less than men due to a lifetime's accumulation of discrimination and discriminatory policies.

For some, securing an income means they are forced to go out to work in unsafe environments so that they can avoid poverty, homelessness and food insecurity. Even before the pandemic, women earned less, held less secure jobs, were more likely to be employed in the informal sector, and to be single-parent households. It has been recognised that at the start of the pandemic, women were on average less able to absorb any economic shocks in comparison to men.[i] These are just some of the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the deep-seated inequalities that exist within our societies. As countries attempt to 'build forward better' the world is presented with a unique opportunity to be able to restructure these systems to ensure that these impacts are not long-lasting.

COVID-19 vaccines are also de facto distributed on the basis of wealth. On average, in high-income countries one in four people have received a COVID-19 vaccination, however in low-income countries only one in more than 500 people have received a vaccination.[ii] If the international community is serious about combating this pandemic, vaccinations must be fairly distributed. Additionally, more support must be given to increasing the number and quality of healthcare facilities, particularly in the Global South. The UNDP has documented that while in the Global North, per 10,000 people there are 55 hospital beds, over 30 doctors and 81 nurses, in the Global South per 10,000 people there are only 7 hospital beds, 2.5 doctors and 6 nurses.[iii] This disparity in the ability to provide medical services has decisive effects upon addressing the pandemic. Without fair distribution of vaccines and other health resources, regions of

the world will continue to suffer from COVID-19. Women and girls, already are at greater risk of poverty, gender-based violence, lack of education, and other inequalities and will be left behind. If this were to happen, the global community, and in particular countries who are not ensuring the fair distribution of COVID-19 vaccinations, will be responsible for a continuing health crisis and for driving worsening gender inequality. All people, regardless of where they live or their income, must have access to a vaccine as quickly as possible. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the interconnectedness of our world. National self-interest does not and will not contain COVID-19. Multilateralism is needed as COVID-19 will continue to threaten all countries unless it is addressed equally across all countries. Fair vaccine distribution is not only vital to addressing inequalities, but it is one of the most effective ways to address the pandemic and its unequal impacts.

This year, as the HLPF examines progress on SDG 3 on ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, it is impossible to ignore that we are in the midst of a global health crisis. While more men die as a result of COVID-19, women also face a myriad of negative health outcomes due to COVID-19 as responses to the pandemic affect medical provision more widely. The reallocation of resources and changing priorities have seen declining quality in healthcare related into sexual and reproductive health services, including maternal health services.[iv] There has been an increase in both maternal and infant mortality and teenage pregnancies due to the lack of services.[v] There are countries where local sports teams are allowed to train in-person, but women must give birth without their partners or chosen support, those with disabilities are denied their carers or chaperones to attend appointments, and translators are not allowed to provide their services. This means women and girls are receiving healthcare interventions that they do not understand and cannot consent to. Additionally, there is increasing evidence to show that women and older people are more likely to suffer from 'long COVID', where a cycle of COVID and additional symptoms have reoccurred over months. Preliminary results from one study found women under 50 were seven times more likely than men of the same age to experience long COVID even seven months after hospital treatment.[vi] Another larger study showed women were most effected by long COVID, with a significant proportion reporting that they had a new disability.[vii] It will take many years to truly know the health impacts of COVID-19 upon women, but while we continue to focus on COVID it is vital that other aspects of healthcare are not neglected. Even during a pandemic there is no reason to move backwards on achievements made in maternal and infant health, sexual and reproductive health, cancer screenings, and in other areas of health. Ensuring quality, human rights-based healthcare for all must be a priority, especially as there is such a high focus on healthcare systems right now.

The Role of the High-Level Political Forum

The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) provides a key opportunity to review progress to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is vital that all of those involved in the HLPF, states, international organisations, the private sector and NGOS and CSOs, reflect on their actives with a critical lens. This reflection has become all the more essential during the COVID-19 pandemic and is fundamental to making sustainable development actions and policies effective. Through working with communities, civil society organisations play a key role in identifying gaps in implementation – it is important to continuously ask, 'who is not being included in development efforts' and 'who is not fully benefiting from development efforts'? Too often, women and girls are being left behind.

"With less than 10 years to go till the 2030 deadline for the SDGs, now is not the time for states to pat themselves on the back. We all need to focus on what hasn't gone right and find ways to do it better. Only by being honest about the challenges we're facing and collaborating with each other will we make sure we meet that 2030 deadline."

— Sharon Fisher, SI President

Civil Society Organisations and Achieving the SDGs

Civil society organisations, such as SI, are in a prime position to observe and respond to gaps in efforts to achieve the SDGs. Civil society organisations (CSOs) implement multidimensional projects that recognise the interconnected nature of the SDGs every day. For many, this 'innovative approach' is not new; many of these now recognised approaches have been used effectively by CSOs long before the creation of the SDGs. Therefore, it is important to recognise the expertise of NGOs and CSOs as agents for sustainable development. NGOs and CSOs are often uniquely placed to support vulnerable groups and can access information and perspectives that it is harder for governments and other services to access. By integrating the perspectives of vulnerable groups into sustainable development programmes, NGOs and CSOs enhance programmes' legitimacy and accountability. The qualitative data and storytelling from those with lived experience that NGOs and CSOs bring to the table is essential and useful knowledge as governments plan their strategy to recovery from the pandemic and to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

This report is one such example of the unique, grassroots perspectives that NGOs and CSOs bring in the spirit of a global partnership for development. It will be impossible to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 without the increased partnership with and support to CSOs.

THE ROAD TO EQUALITY:

International President's Appeal

SI's International President's Appeal combines education and awareness of critical issues impacting women and girls, including female genital mutilation, human trafficking, domestic violence, migration, the rights of older women, and child, early and forced marriage. The Appeal supports a series of projects in local communities, which generate stories about, and solutions to, the barriers that prevent women and girls achieving their full potential. This information is used to educate, empower and enable, supporting women across the world to become advocates, to create their own projects, and to make the change they want.

UPDATE: The Soroptimist Six, Ending FGM

Education, campaigns and awareness raising efforts to combat FGM address SDG3 on health, SDG4 on education, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

In 2020, Soroptimist International reported on its partnership with the Global Media Campaign to spread the message about how FGM destroys lives. SI's "Road to Equality" Direct Action Grants supported six inspirational youth activists, known as the Soroptimist Six, to develop their own powerful messages that are specific and relevant to the five African countries they live in. Through these grants, the Soroptimist Six appeared on the TV, on radio and in print, to expose the realities of FGM. By empowering these young women and girls in their own communities, that real change can be made and FGM can be eradicated.

During the pandemic, Sierra Leone became a country of focus in the Road to Equality Appeal, as the President of Sierra Leone said that calling for the immediate eradication of FGM would be "political suicide". While resistance to banning FGM is strong, there is ongoing campaigning and advocacy to end the practice, including from former ministers. This suggests that banning FGM may have increasing support, but instead one man is placing his own political career above the lives and rights of the 3.91 million women and girls of Sierra Leone.

The Bondo Society in Sierra Leone has become a particular focus community. An estimated 89% of girls undergo FGM in Bondo ceremonies, which in part demonstrates the extent of support for the practice. Rugiatu Turay, one of the Soroptimist Six and a prominent anti-FGM campaigner and former government minister is trying to target her campaigning within this community.

In a Soroptimist International podcast, which helped raise awareness about anti-FGM activism in Sierra Leone, Rugiatu explained why eradicating FGM is so important:"FGM is the removal of the clitoris for no medical reasons. It has lifetime consequences – psychological, emotional and social. In communities, it increases and promotes child marriage and teenage pregnancy, and results in girls dropping out of school. It also increases infant mortality rate. Ending FGM is important, so girls are able to focus on their schooling. Ending FGM means teenage pregnancies are reduced, as is the infant mortality rate and poverty. Through education, girls can build self-esteem, and gain courage to speak about issues concerning their communities and country at large. I am passionate to see FGM end for the simple fact that women will live without fear in the bedroom, and in the labour room."

Masks for Equality

The work of organisations like Soroptimist International that contributed to combating the spread of COVID-19, supports the achievement of SDG3 on health and wellbeing, SDG8 on decent work, SDG12 on responsible consumption and production, and because of evidence that women frontline workers had less access to PPE than their male counterparts, SDG5 on gender equality.

In March 2020, much of the world entered lockdowns, and established projects became disrupted. New ways of working had to be found, and project leaders and participants often needed access to personal protective equipment (PPE) which was in short supply. SI's global membership stepped into action, sewing masks, surgical caps and slippers, gowns and more. These PPE provision projects quickly grew and adapted to community need, with Soroptimists finding other ways to help including food delivery, providing psychosocial support, calling on isolated vulnerable members of the community and other innovative ways to support the shortage of supplies and services created because of COVID 19. Everyone found ways to acquire supplies, sew, and distribute, without ever meeting in person. Hundreds of thousands of items were made and distributed to frontline workers and other unprotected and vulnerable people. This was in the early days of the pandemic, during a time when many claimed masks were ineffective and should not be used.

Uniting a Global Movement During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By providing training to empower Soroptimists, this webinar series supported SDG3 on health, SDG4 on education, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG10 on reduced inequalities, SDG16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

With over 70,000 members globally, the Road to Equality Appeal sought to unite these members and to spread awareness and knowledge. Through webinars and campaigns, experts and those with lived experiences were able to show the impact and importance key gender equality issues, including FGM, child, early and forced marriage, domestic violence and others. As the pandemic made other forms of meetings and collaborations difficult, these webinars helped build skills for women to be advocates at the community, national and regional levels. The webinars also included orientations for key UN commissions to increase understanding on global advocacy and to encourage action on the international stage.

Since starting this programme of webinars, approximately 3,000 people have attended and many thousands more have viewed the digital recordings, ensuring no matter which time zone they live in they have access to the same information and advocacy support.

The webinar series triggered conversations about the issues and many projects were developed or supported as a result. Since initiating this programme of webinars, Soroptimist International clubs across all regions are creating their own awareness raising webinars which focus on local issues.

Beyond Football: Keeping Girls in School, India

By working to expand the opportunities available to girls, Beyond Football contributes to SDG4 on education, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG10 on reduced inequalities, and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

For years, women's and girls' access to and enrolment in high quality education has been known to be a pivotal tool to address child, early and force marriage, human trafficking, economic inequality, health challenges and gender-based violence. Yet, there are many barriers to girls completing education, with 63.5% of village girls leaving education during adolescence. Almost 27% of girls are married before the age of 18, meaning they experience child or early marriage, and 70% of girls experience different forms of abuse.

The Beyond Football programme, which Soroptimist International supports in collaboration with Shreeja India, combines sports and education to develop key personal and life skills. 200 indigenous girls aged 10 to 18, in the Purba Burdwan district of West Bengal have benefited from the programme through intense sports coaching and enriched out-of-school education. Crucially, the programme provides the support to girls' education that may be lacking from families, teachers and their communities. The girls who participate in the programme have been significantly limited and have been denied reaching their fully potential due to their social status. This status significantly limits what options the girls think are available to them and this puts them at increased risk of child marriage, abuse and trafficking. With there being increasing evidence that expectations placed on children can have a significant impact on their life outcomes, programmes like Beyond Football are able to provide encouragement and ambition when that is not given by others who play a major role in the girls' lives. Through the programme's activities and curriculum, the girls are able to become independent, combat harmful social practices and lead an empowered, dignified life.

Immediately, girls who participate in the programme benefit from: increased confidence and life skill development; equitable access to opportunities including educational opportunities which are often harder to access for indigenous girls; digital learning to find out more about the wider world; decreased risks of leaving education; improvements in overall health; and, support girls to become professional athletes if they choose.

In the longer term, Shreeja India's Beyond Football programme, with the support of the Road to Equality Appeal, will have four core pathways for girls who participate. For girls who want and have the skills to play football professionally, they will be supported to access more training either in India or abroad, to support their journey to becoming a professional footballer. For girls wishing to pursue more academic careers, they will be supported in pursuing higher education or professional courses. Equally, girls who show a passion for a vocation will be supported in improving those vocational skills so that they can secure a stable income of their own. Lastly, for participants who show interests in multiple areas, the programme aims to foster those multiple interests ultimately allowing the girl to make her own empowered choice.

Lugari Youth Leadership and Mentoring Camp, Kenya

Supportive training, education and skills activities, like those at the Lugari Youth Leadership and Mentoring Camp contribute to SDG4 on education, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG8 on decent work, SDG10 on reduced inequalities, and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

The Road to Equality Appeal supports the Youth Leadership and Mentoring Training held at the Lugari Community Resource Centre, led by Khayanga Wasike, CEO and President of the Willing Hearts International Society Canada. The purpose of the annual event is to empower girls aged 14-18 to become leaders by building their skills in peacebuilding, good governance, human rights, finances, health, media, entrepreneurship and community connection.

Upon their return home, the participants apply what they have learned to implement projects that serve needs in their communities becoming catalysts of positive change in the society as peace builders, social innovators and global citizens. As leaders and peace builders, these girls have a stronger voice and feel empowered to end harmful gender discriminatory practices such as FGM, child marriage, domestic violence — exactly the themes we advocate to end under the Road to Equality Appeal.

However, the restraints and social distancing requirements that the COVID-19 pandemic requires, has meant that girls are unable to travel and stay for the eight-day residential camp. It is vital that support for these initiatives continues during the pandemic, so they are able to re-start in person as soon as possible. Therefore, the Road to Equality Appeal was able to direct funds to the creation of a new Community Resource Centre that will provide a more conducive environment for the training of these young future leaders. By taking the opportunities of programme delays, it was possible to support expanding the Leadership and Mentoring Camp's facilities. The cost of construction and electricity reaches a total of only $10,000, demonstrating how it is possible to make a significant contribution to gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment at a relatively low cost. With this investment, it will be possible to expand the number of girls who can participate in the programme, and to ensure the Camp's sustainability.

The next Youth Leadership and Mentoring Camp is scheduled to be in November/December 2021, and aims to support the attendance of 200-250 girls so they can benefit from the empowering programme of workshops and activities, that encourage economic independence and stability, women's participation, leadership, skills training, and business ownership. Many of the programmes at the camp focus on health, youth leadership, sustainable agricultural use, rural micro-enterprise, employment and career development, whilst supporting sustainable community water solutions, together with many other educational programmes; all aimed at progressing the skills and confidence of the girls involved.

The Social Pillar of Sustainable Development

Adjusting Actions to Achieve the Social Pillar of Sustainable Development

Over the last year our social world has totally transformed. The impacts of COVID-19 have been felt across all of society and have impacted all forms of social life with people required to drastically reduce face-to-face contact. Social isolation, while necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19, has had profound negative effects on people's wellbeing, with there being mounting evidence that women and girls have been disproportionately affected by mental health difficulties during the pandemic. Women and girls frequently hold frontline or essential jobs, and have the additional responsibilities of childcare, education, food security, and other aspects of supporting a household. Providing for the needs of individuals and families has brought additional difficulties over the last year. Policies and programmes must respond to this gendered phenomenon, when ensuring all have the food security, health services, education, and other services and social protection floors. The Soroptimist projects contained in this section, demonstrate the gaps and challenges in joining-up approaches across these different sectors and services.

Limitations on social contact also drastically affect service provision and the accessibility and availability of social protection floors. The projects in this section, which includes a segment on health, reflect the impact that COVID has had on efforts to achieve the social pillar of sustainable development. Women of all ages and youth in justice systems, already often socially isolated and in need of additional support, have been further cut-off from their support structures and communities. Technology can provide a vital tool to help minimise this isolation and ensure the continuation of psychosocial services, but can also presents new stressors such as cyberbullying, connectivity problems and the ability to own or have access to a device. Women have better rehabilitation outcomes when living in the community compared to being in prison, so maintaining their ability to access community-based services is essential, not only for the women themselves, but also to ensure positive outcomes for the justice system.

Women and girls are facing more violence at home, and with limitations placed on contact and movement, and many women in economically precarious situations, options to escape this violence are extremely limited. For girls, with schools closed, those who often could identify and intervene in cases of abuse, violence, child marriage, food insecurity and other challenges are now unable to do so. For women who work, if they no longer go to their workplaces signs of violence or abuse can remain hidden and support networks are unavailable. Many women face homelessness as an alternative to living with violence. This is compounded by cuts in financing to services, frequently run by CSOs, which provide women and their families with alternative accommodation and support. It is impossible to fully address the impacts of COVID-19, without addressing these gendered experiences of service provision. These services, which are experiencing a higher demand than ever before, must be fully funded and accessible — they are not only an essential social protection floor which can reduce future pressure on state services, but they are a key part of providing justice to survivors of gender-based violence.

All the projects presented in this section address the needs of women and girls who experience particular vulnerabilities which are created and heightened by their gender. It is vital that responses to these vulnerabilities take a gender-transformative approach, to not only respond to and provide for the needs of women and girls, but to also address the underlying causes of gender inequalities. The social pillar of sustainable development requires people-centred, human rights-based actions.

Recommendations

To best adjust actions to achieve the social pillar for sustainable development, and to address inequalities, Soroptimist International has developed the following recommendations based upon the projects below. Governments should take the following steps, in collaboration with CSOs and other stakeholders:

- In recognition that many services CSOs provide are required social protection floors that fulfil state obligations, those services should be fully funded, resources and their accessibility supported. CSOs are often best placed to provide these essential services, however, these services are undermined when their existence is dependent upon donations despite states' reliance upon them.

- Those experiencing homelessness, poverty, are in state care, living in shelters, in shared housing, who are in the justice system, and others should be supported to have access to a mobile phone with internet access, including by providing them with that technology. Access to a mobile phone improve service accessibility, ensures access to banking, health, social and education services, and connects women and girls to their communities. This is essential for closing the gender digital divide which supports the perpetuation of inequalities.

- High-quality psychosocial services must be expanded and made accessible, affordable, and where possible free to those who need it. These services should be supported to become gender-transformative and able to cater for the specific needs of all women and girls throughout their life course, including those who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

- Urgent action must be taken to ensure all public services and social protection floors use a joined-up approach that will prevent women and girls being unable to access the services and support they need and are entitled to. This can be especially important in rural areas, where there is less infrastructure and people currently rely more on private resources, which women frequently have less access to.

EDUCATE EMPOWER ENABLE

COVID-19 Work of Tomorrow's Women Wirral: UK
SI Heswall and District

Providing joined-up gender-responsive programmes within the justice system, like that provided by Tomorrow's Women Wirral, contributed to SDG3 on good health and wellbeing, SDG4 on education, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG10 on reducing inequalities, SDG16 on peace, justice and strong institutions and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

Tomorrow's Women Wirral is a safe, non-judgemental environment and meaningful community-based alternative to prison. It is committed to reducing offending and diverting women from custody by providing support and interventions so they can make alterative and positive lifestyle choices, and changes — this is vital as prison is known to perpetuate and compound the inequalities that frequently drive offending rates, such as poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and a lack of access to education. In the UK there are very few women's prisons, which means women facing prison may be incarcerated long distances away from their families and support networks. Community-based alternatives therefore become essential and provide much more effective forms of rehabilitation. These services became all the more essential during the pandemic as it prevented women from being removed from their communities and being placed in prison environments where inmates are at increased risk of contracting COVID. Despite the vital social protection floors and services organisations like Tomorrow's Women's Wirral provide, they face chronic underfunding and instead of being fully funded by the state and recognised as a state service, they rely on the support of community members, volunteers and partners for resources and to maintain the services provided.

Recognising the importance of community alternatives to prison, in 2010 Soroptimist and Magistrate Maureen Thompson was asked to establish a Women's Centre as a direct alternative to Custody by the Court and Probation service. This was a huge challenge, as despite asking for these services and acknowledging their necessity, no funds or premises were allocated. Instead, responsibility to provide these essential state services and social protection floors fell to civil society. Maureen turned to her Soroptimist club for support to get these services running and the Centre was first able to open its doors in 2011. Since then, SI Heswall, SI Birkenhead and Wallasey and others have continued to support Tomorrow's Women Wirral. Without being able to secure the funds and premises with the support of other Soroptimists, it would not have been possible for Tomorrow's Women Wirral to maintain its contract with the Ministry of Justice, ensuring women are able to stay in employment and out of prison. Now, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a different approach had to be taken.

Due to COVID-19 the Centre had to close to the public, but also had to find a sustainable way to continue providing services to the women it works with, including the statutory scheduled

appointment for women in the probation system. Before COVID-19, around 650 women would attend the Centre each week, so SI Heswall and District kicked into action to support the outreach service that was quickly designed to ensure the continuation of help to vulnerable women. Through the 'Femail Delivery Service' members of SI Heswall and District ensured women received essential hygiene products, food parcels and other goods to support wellbeing and mental health. Simultaneously, they ensured vulnerable women in society who often experience isolation were able to maintain contact with other members of their community while respecting social distancing.

In addition, the Femail Delivery Service distributed 437 mobile phones to women who previously would visit the centre for support and advice, making sure they could still access one-on-one support and courses key to their rehabilitation, including courses on anger management, parenting, budgeting and other life skills key to preventing and overcoming inequalities that are being exacerbated by COVID-19. By distributing the mobile phones, SI Heswall and its volunteers were able to adjust their free New Beginnings Counselling Service to be a phone-service to maintain their Tomorrow's Women Wirral clients. This counselling service was first established to cater for the women who came to the centre having experienced trauma and for those with vulnerabilities — with counselling often expensive to access, this service ensured those women who needed it could receive counselling, with Soroptimists being among some of the qualified counsellors providing the services.

Mobilising other SI clubs, such as SI Birkenhead and SI Wallasey, SI Heswall and District was able to secure emergency COVID funding for Tomorrow's Women Wirral. The resulting outcomes of this funding and the in-kind support provided by the club meant that incidents of domestic and intimate partner violence and poor mental health were more easily detected and responded to appropriately. In turn, this meant that women who needed it were able to visit the Centre for safeguarding support in accordance with COVID-19 regulations.

Tomorrow's Women Wirral
Women Supporting Women

Frequently, community-based services, like Tomorrow's Women Wirral, work with women facing cross-cutting barriers to equality and empowerment including social isolation, a lack of education, mental health challenges and gender-based violence. All the evidence demonstrates that for those already facing discrimination pre-COVID, the pandemic has set their progress towards equality and empowerment backwards. For progress to happen it's essential that services like Tomorrow's Women Wirral are fully funded and meaningfully equipped to minimise risks of equality regression, and to provide social protection floors which governments have committed to. Tomorrow's Women Wirral fills a gap in Women's Services, including by working with sex workers in the night-time economy and over 7500 women have already benefited from the Centre. COVID-19 and its impacts cannot be allowed to prevent this work from continuing. Due to the long-term relationship between SI Heswall and District and Tomorrow's Women Wirral they were able to collaborate to respond to the extraordinary crisis to ensure women who rely on these services were not left behind.

COVID-19 Pandemic Project for Southern Womens Safety Service: Australia
SI Southern District of Adelaide

Ensuring that women are able to access essential services, including shelters, by supporting their ability to use safe transportation contributes to SDG5 on gender equality, SDG11 on sustainable cities and communities, SDG16 for peace, justice and strong institutions and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

With the COVID-19 pandemic came rising levels of domestic and intimate partner violence, and with that violence came a corresponding need for access to services such as women's shelters. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessary limitations to travel and movement also created additional barriers to accessing those services, especially for women in rural areas without their own means of transport. For some, this could mean they would remain trapped in abusive and violent situations or face homelessness.

SI Southern District of Adelaide, wanting to do something to support women needing to use the Southern Womens Safety Service used their pre-existing relationship with the organisation to find out what forms of assistance would be most effective. Through these discussions it became clear that women were struggling to afford the travel costs to get to the centre. Transport in the southern areas surrounding the centre can be expensive and with women often having to flee abuse without documentation, they're unable to get the transport concessions which might make the transport affordable.

Recognising that public services have a role in women's protection, SI Southern District of Adelaide contacted the Southern Adelaide Transport Department, asking that they donate the costs of each transit card that the SI club would then add funds to. This joined-up approach across public services is essential to ensure women can safely access the support they need when escaping violence. By providing pre-paid metro cards to the centre, SI Southern District of Adelaide were able to ensure that women needing to access the Southern Womens Safety Service could do so by train or by bus. By ensuring that all the cards had a reasonable amount of money on them, SI Southern District of Adelaide could also ensure that the women could attend other appointments for medical, legal, social and other services they and their children may need.

3 GOOD HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Health

A vital strand of the Social Pillar of Sustainable Development

Health services worldwide have struggled with the additional burdens of treating COVID-19 and have been stretched beyond capacity. The heroic efforts of all healthcare and frontline workers must be acknowledged and celebrated. It must also be recognised that the majority of healthcare workers are women. 70% of the global health workforce being women, with that number increasing to 90% when including social care workers.[viii] Many of these women frontline workers, particularly those who are women of colour, lacked access to PPE. Where gender disaggregated data exists, it shows that PPE has not been fairly distributed between men and women, and particularly to women of colour.

Over the last 18 months, during the COVID-19 pandemic healthcare providers had to make decisions about priorities and we have seen a drastic shift in resources away from essential programmes and towards combatting COVID-19. Frequently, this is due to limited resources; it is not reasonable to try to celebrate healthcare workers and providers and at the same time reduce resources available to them to ensure high-quality healthcare for all.

While COVID-19 must be combatted, it does not need to be at the expense of other areas of essential health care. Beyond the direct impacts of the coronavirus itself on those who contract it, decisions about healthcare provision and healthcare disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic mean that the world runs the risk of reversing decades of improvements on healthcare provision and reach. Maternal health, infant mortality and child health have been significantly affected, with there being great concerns that rates of infant and maternal mortality will increase, and general health outcome will decrease. Childhood vaccination programmes have been interrupted in about 70 counties. This has already led to the resurgence of other communicable diseases, which in turn could prompt a spike in preventable deaths.[ix] There have been severe delays on disease screenings, which has resulted in potentially curable illnesses being detected too late for medical interventions to be successful. It is particularly concerning that there is a clear gendered impact in which healthcare services have declined during the pandemic — women's and girls' health should never be less of a priority, even during a time of crisis.

To achieve Sustainable Development Goal 3 and ensure healthy lives and well-being for all at all ages, we cannot sacrifice the health of many even in order to combat a global pandemic. Services must be maintained during a pandemic to prevent future health crises and complex health impacts post-pandemic. In particular, there must be a step-up in action to rebuild the progress achieved on women's and children's health over recent decades, the pandemic cannot be used as a justification for moving backwards on health equality.

Recommendations

To ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing at all ages, Governments should take the following actions, based on the evidence provided by the projects below:

- Access to high-quality healthcare must be universally available. Income, nationality, gender, ethnicity and other factors should not be a barrier to accessing healthcare, as all have an equal right to health. Health programmes should be examined and expanded to ensure that they are not discriminatory on any grounds.

- All decisions on health provision during the COVID-19 pandemic must be based on evidence. Hospital management must be able to justify their decision on limiting healthcare, including by using risk assessments. There are many reports of hospitals creating healthcare access policies based on perceptions that there is no evidence for, placing patients, and particularly women and girls, at increased health risk.

- All women must have access to high-quality maternal health services, including women in rural areas. During the pandemic, this includes allowing the woman to select an advocate to attend appointments and birth. This is proven to create better health outcomes for parents and infants, decreases maternal mortality risks, and best fulfils human rights obligations relevant to health.

- There must be improved resourcing to support healthcare workers and providers through the pandemic, to ensure that healthcare providers can promote health outcome post-pandemic and can build resilience. Many healthcare providers and hospitals were stretched beyond capacity before the pandemic hit. To ensure healthcare resilience capacity buffers should be introduced to healthcare systems which will support those systems being better able to cope with capacity surges.[x] This will require full resourcing and support by governments, the private sector, CSOs and other stakeholders.

- 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 the information they need, and redeveloping programmes so they are accessible and respond to the realities and future needs of women and girls.

"During COVID-19 all aspects of health have been affected by reduced access to medical care and medicines, food insecurity, violence, social isolation, mental health issues and more. Women and girls are affected the most as caregivers and providers of their families and we must ensure that they do not fall further behind due to the pandemic."

— Bev Bucur, SI Director of Advocacy

Thalassemia Awareness Project: Kuwait
SI Kuwait

By promoting awareness and access to healthcare for a congenital illness, this project supports SDG3 on good health and wellbeing, SDG4 on education, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG10 on reduced inequalities and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

The number of patients living with thalassemia in the Arab Gulf region is the highest in the world. While the Kuwait government has an effective service that helps test for inherited diseases like thalassemia and there is still no specialised centre for treatment. Through their project, SI Kuwait aimed to raise awareness and funds to open a thalassemia centre to ensure patients could get the care they needed, promote blood drives, create support groups, donate blood pumps to individuals in need and encourage young people to have genetic blood-testing.

Thalassemia is group of inherited conditions which affects haemoglobin, the substance used by red blood cells to carry oxygen around the body. Those with thalassemia experience problems shortly after birth as they produce either no, or too little haemoglobin, which can make them anaemic and cause tiredness, shortness of breath and weakness. More serious types of thalassemia can cause serious organ damage and be life threatening. As with many inheritable diseases, it's possible to be a carrier of thalassemia without suffering from it; to be born with thalassemia a person must inherit the gene from both parents.

Those living with thalassemia will need specialist care throughout their lives, with the main treatments being regular blood transfusions and chelation therapy to ensure there is not too much iron in the blood as a result of the necessary blood transfusions. The only possible cure for thalassemia is a stem cell or bone marrow transplant, but this is rarely done because of the risks involved.

Working in partnership with a regional NGO called Loyac, SI Kuwait developed a curriculum about thalassemia that could be used on a yearly summer course to educate, enable and empower youth to spread awareness about the disease and encourage them to join the advocacy movement. The seven-day course included guest speakers, field trips, blood drives and mentoring in communication skills and acquired knowledge.

As a direct result of SI Kuwait's advocacy work, the government policy on blood pumps changed. Previously, it was only distributed free to citizens of Kuwait, leaving many in need unable to access this vital piece of equipment. Now anyone living with thalassemia, regardless of nationality, is able to receive a blood pump if they live in Kuwait. This marks a significant achievement for Kuwait in ensuring equal health outcomes for all.

Lautoka Lockdown Struggle for New Mothers and Babies: Fiji
SI Lautoka

As this project supported mothers and new-borns during a global pandemic, its actions contributed to SDG3 on good health and wellbeing, SDG5 on gender equality and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

Like many cities, Lautoka went into lockdown following cases of COVID-19. While this will have been a challenge for all citizens, it posed a particular challenge to eleven new mothers and babies who found themselves stranded at Lautoka hospital at the start of the 19-day lockdown.

With many women living in rural and isolated areas in Fiji, it is common for pregnant women to travel to the maternity departments in hospitals to have their babies, especially if they are identified to have higher risk pregnancies or if they are more likely to have complications in birth. Usually mothers who travel significant distances to the hospital will come prepared for two days of hospitalisation, but when the Lautoka lockdown was announced with immediate effect those in hospital were unable to leave — they had no option but to stay at the hospital for the duration of the lockdown with their new born babies. Roadblocks and checkpoints prevented women's relatives from being able to bring essential items the women and their babies needed, and quickly the hospital had run out of supplies.

SI Lautoka immediately responded, stepping in to provide support and supplies necessary to care for young babies. They liaised with the hospital to create a shopping list of essentials, including diapers, baby wipes, clothes, soap and other sanitary items for the women. While all health services were stretched during the pandemic, this kind of civil society support became essential to ensure hospitals were able to meet the needs of their patients and continue to deliver high standards of healthcare.

The work of SI Lautoka, who were joined by another organisation in these efforts, Velovelo Kirtan Ramayan Mandali. These joint efforts were recognised by the Civil Society Organization Humanitarian Coordinator for the Fiji Council of Social Services, Mosese Baseisei, who thanked SI for coming forward to assist these mothers who had become isolated from their support networks at a crucial time in their lives. The Sister in charge of the maternity ward also highlighted that the pandemic had affected the mental health of these new mothers, and knowing that they were supported by the community provided emotional reassurances in addition to the essential supplies.

Reproductive Health Peer Educators' Training: Mongolia
SI Erdenet

Through providing training to girls so that they can become peer educators in the area of sexual and reproductive health, this project supports the achievement of SDG3 on good health and wellbeing, SDG4 on education, SDG5 on gender equality, and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

Access to sexual and reproductive health education for girls is essential for improving their health outcomes. It is known that by improving young people's knowledge and attitudes related to sexual and reproductive health and behaviours can reduce unwanted pregnancies, risky behaviour, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, and reduces instances of sexual violence and abuse in the relationships of adolescents and young adults.

Taking an innovative approach, SI Erdenet with support from Mongolia's Health Department, sought to train adolescent girls to become Peer Educators. In this role they would be able to share current information about sexual and reproductive health in their schools. Creating Peer Educators was identified as a key way to expand sexual and reproductive health education by SI Erdenet. They recognised that this education was frequently less effective than it could be because the girls would not ask the questions they wanted, concerned that it was socially awkward or embarrassing for them to ask these questions. Not wanting this to be a barrier to their education, SI Erdenet saw the Peer Educators as the solution — girls would be more likely to share their difficulties, questions and situations with a peer than a teacher. By breaking down these communication barriers through the Peer Educators, girls would be able to get the information and additional support they needed when necessary.

The Economic Pillar of Sustainable Development

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. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic disparities and inequalities between men and women, girls and boys, became even more acute. Worldwide, women were more likely to be made unemployed during the pandemic and face economic insecurity. Additionally, turning back to traditional gender roles, women were more likely to step back from work in order to provide child care, teach from home and perform other caring responsibilities. As a result of the pandemic, women were more likely to risk falling into poverty due to issues like the gender pay gap, women earning less and women working in the informal economy. Additionally, due to the same issues, many women lack a financial safety net. They do not have equivalent savings to men to rely on, and many women were not eligible for the same social protection floors as men. The COVID-19 pandemic made clear the impacts of systemic economic gender inequality, the impacts of which in tandem with the pandemic, will continue for years to come.

As well as women holding less wealth overall than men, women also found it difficult to regain employment after job loss. All these realities mean that women are particularly vulnerable to austerity measures, a phenomenon already evidenced by previous measures taken during austerity. Governments and international financial institutions (IFIs) should focus on these lessons learnt, and find new, alternative processes that do not disproportionately place financial burdens and impacts on women and girls, consequently regressing gender equality efforts.

To respond to these impacts it is essential that governments, in meaningful consultation with and inclusion of CSOs and other stakeholders redevelop policies which ensure that fully address the discriminatory foundation of these gendered experiences. Too often women make decision not because those are the choices they want, but those are the choices that are most straightforward in society and that are supported by the nuances of government policy. This must be rectified if inequalities in society, and specifically gender inequality, are to be overcome.

When addressing the economic inequality faced by women and girls, it is essential to acknowledge and confront the multifaceted causes for that inequality. Barriers to education at all ages, lack of child care access, experiences of gender-based violence, trafficking, abusive labour conditions, and many other factors prevent women and girls from reaching their potential and contributing to economic sustainability. As an organisation that seeks to educate, empower and enable women and girls, Soroptimist International views education as a transformative tool. However, it is important to recognise that for educational opportunities to translate into sustainable economic outcomes, is it essential for there to be a joined-up approach across policy areas, ensuring that women can be equal participants and leaders in the economic sphere.

Recommendations

Soroptimist International recommends that Governments, with the support and partnership of other stakeholders, take the following actions to ensure the economic empowerment of women and girls and the eradication of economic inequality:

- In collaboration with IFIs develop, fund and staff COVID-19 response and recovery plans that focuses on care and equality and need to remake our economic systems to facilitate just transitions to sustainable economies with decent work for everyone. The development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of these plans should ensure women's full, equal, effective and meaningful participation and leadership.

- Scholarship programmes that are targeted towards women and girls, particularly those who have experienced vulnerabilities, must be expanded and developed. This includes improving scholarship access for women and girls from lower and middle income countries.

- Increase the use of cash awards, including scholarships, microloans and microfinancing, that recognise that the women recipients are best placed to know how that money would best benefit them. In-kind donations or vouchers, limit women, are not nuanced enough to know their individual reality, and can fail to address the barriers that are actually inhibiting economic empowerment.

- Expand education and training opportunities for women and girls, ensuring they have access to all levels of education throughout their life course. Older women, women in the justice system, and women who have experienced abusive labour conditions should not be left behind. Regardless of age, all people have a right to education, to fill gaps in their essential education and should have the opportunity to retrain to maximise economic opportunity and sustainability.

- Policies on childcare must be reformed so that all women who want to work can. All child care services must be free or affordable.

- Education and economic empowerment programmes should be considered essential for supporting the psychosocial rehabilitation of survivors of gender-based violence. These services must increase their collaboration to ensure participants are able to access both the psychosocial and educational support they need.

- Efforts to identify women working in abusive labour conditions, as trafficked workers, as indentured servants or under conditions of modern day slavery must be increased. Any women and girls identified must be given free educational opportunities, including retraining opportunities, and be fully supported after education to access safe economic opportunities. Employers who exploit women in any way must be investigated, prosecuted and held accountable.

Live Your Dream Awards and COVID-19: Adapting our approach for sustained impact

By ensuring that women and girls are able to access and participate in high-quality, safe education, the Live Your Dream Awards contribute to SDG4 on education, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG8 on decent work, SDG10 on reduced inequalities and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

Education and training remains a key tool to support all women and girls in achieving their full potential — access and participation in safe education at all levels remains critical and actions must be stepped up to realise the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda and to contribute to the eradication of inequalities. The Live Your Dream Awards are education grants that provide cash awards to women who are supporting themselves and their dependents while attending educational programmes in over 1,200 communities around the globe, including in the US, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, the Philippines, Venezuela and other countries. The Live Your Dream Awards are tailored to support women living in poverty but who are experiencing additional obstacles and vulnerabilities including racism, teen pregnancy and violence. Each year, more than 1,800 women receive USD 2.8 million in funding to support their educational goals through the Live Your Dream Awards.

Adapting to COVID-19, the programme has had to find new ways to identify participants, as previously clubs supporting their scholarship participants would provide support in-person. Now, applications and support must abide by social distancing regulations in place. Additionally, the relationships with the educational institutions that participants attend, as well organisations that provide social support like shelters, are more important than ever. Further supporting these services, Soroptimist Clubs often provide ongoing support to their past recipients in the community, spanning from mentoring, financial workshops, childcare, gifts for the holidays, continued cash grants, and more. It is strong working relationships between organisations that can ensure the necessary multifaceted support women need is provided in a cohesive and effective way — when these services act in isolation, the care they provide is less effective and can contribute to people being left behind in sustainable development efforts during COVID-19. Due to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic upon women, in the form of increased caregiving requirements, decreasing economic opportunity, and decreased access to education, the Live Your Dream Awards have taken on additional importance as a mechanism to support women to ensure their own economic and social security as the world works to emerge from this pandemic.

Live Your Dream Awards: Impact

This Live Your Dream Awards data demonstrates how the Awards contribute to the SDDs, as well as the clear need to increase women's incomes and further improve access to all levels of education.

- 70% of Live Your Dream Award recipients reported living in poverty on their application.
- 79.6% of Live Your Dream Award recipients reported that their expenses exceed their income.
- Applicants from Brazil, Mexico, Paraguay, the Philippines, and Panama have reported incomes of less than $1.25 a day.
- 78% of Live Your Dream Award recipients who completed their education have higher paid employment.
- 84% of Live Your Dream Award recipients who completed their education increase their standard of living.
- Over half (54%) of recipients of the Live Your Dream Award have reported experiencing some form of violence.
- 97% of recipients of the Live Your Dream Award reported living in a safe environment.
- 94% of women who received a Live Your Dream Award report an increased self-esteem.

Paula's Story

"My dream is to become a good doctor and help other women understand the great value of their bodies and health."

Born in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Paula grew up in household which struggled with poverty and violence. After her father nearly beat her mother to death one night, Paula, her mom and two brothers finally fled—running from place to place for safety. With her mother needing to work to support her children, by age ten Paula became the primary care-giver for her siblings. Despite showing great educational talents and teaching herself to read at four years-old, Paula had to leave school when she was fourteen to work full-time. But keeping her educational ambitions, she continued visiting the library and fought for improvements in Brazilian schools.

Paula became a mother relatively young, having her first child at the age of twenty. "When I realized that I had become responsible for someone, I decided to go back to school. I was able to get my high school diploma. I wanted to be a doctor, but I didn't believe I could pass the entrance exam and I would not be able to stop working because I had my young son to raise."

Struggling to pay rent, she moved to another city in Brazil where she focused on getting the education she missed out on as a child and creating a stable home environment for her son. Throughout this adversity, Paula's greatest ambition was to study at medical school. Gathering the money she could from working, she paid her way to a prep school to help her study for the medical school entrance exam which she passed. Now she works several jobs to see herself through medical school – while these jobs help her support herself and her family, they prevent her from studying as much as she'd like to so she can become the best doctor she can. The Live Your Dream Award that Paula received helps relieve some of this financial pressure so she can focus on her studies: "The Live Your Dream Awards will help me finish my internship and only focus on medicine in my last year, without worrying about bills and other external obligations."

Why Cash Awards? We believe that the women who receive a Live Your Dream Award are best placed to know how their award will be best spent. Too frequently educational support is dedicated to fees, when the barriers to women accessing education may be the costs of childcare, transportation, safe accommodation, having a computer or simply paying bills. This cash-based approach, which has been long-used by the Live Your Dream Awards is increasingly being proven as one of the most effective ways to provide support and aid that ensures people are able to transform their lives (reference). Cash reaches people quicker, costs less to distribute, support local economies and most importantly, meets the needs of recipients more effectively. Fundamentally, cash awards are empowering — they give women the power of choice and control over their lives and how they want to live. This means that cash awards don't only fund education, they address other aspects of underlying inequalities and ensures women have the resources they need to become leaders and to fully and meaningfully participate in political, economic and public life.

Training Centre for Young Domestic Workers in Uvira: Democratic Republic of the Congo SI Val Brabant-Waterloo, SI Beersel, SI Vierre-Lesse and SI Tubize in Belgium

As this collaborative project, focused upon providing education and training to support those coming out of conditions of modern day slavery and indentured servitude, this project supports the achievement of SDG1 on eradicating poverty, SDG4 on education, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG8 on decent work for all, SDG10 on reducing inequalities and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

Women and Children Protection (WCP) is an NGO in the Democratic Republic of the Congo which promotes the fundamental rights of young domestic workers. With the financial support of Soroptimist Clubs in Belgium, WCP was able to launch a project which aims to provide training to children and young domestic and vulnerable workers who have fewer opportunities. This project will not only combat the violence that many of these young people face, but it will also raise awareness among the political and administrative authorities and advocate to help those in a sector which is frequently invisible or hidden due to the status and age of those who work in the sector. The project first started in 2013, but adapting to the SDGs framework, the project works to address inequalities, inclusive economic growth and decent work for all, and ensures inclusive and equitable quality education, by creating a safe educational environment that meets current standards of inclusive and sustainable growth.

Soroptimist Clubs in Belgium, recognising that many of the young and vulnerable domestic workers in Uvira are young women and girls and that many of these will be living in domestic servitude or in conditions of modern slavery, collaborated with WCP to help equip the school. Frequently, strained local resources mean that global north-south partnerships, like this one, can facilitate the rapid acquisition of much needed equipment. Thanks to the donations made by the Belgian Soroptimist Clubs, the school was able to get the tables, chairs, blackboards, notebooks, pencils and others items that they needed.

With these resources the WCP school could now start providing their four-year courses which would provide their students with the basic education they had missed out on, gaining skills in functional literacy, writing, maths and other key skills which would help them find work outside of domestic work. Between 2013 and the end of 2018, 210 pupils were able to receive their basic school diploma and 197 gained diplomas in tailoring and 90 received diplomas in culinary art.

With the success of the project, the school is set to expand – with high demand the two classrooms have become cramped. The global north-south partnership between WCP and Soroptimists in Belgium is set to continue, with the ambition being to expand the school and build a second floor to double their capacity and to support even more young women and girls escape from domestic work and access education.

A New Dimension of Freedom for Women in Prison through Job Traineeships: Italy
SI Union of Italy

Through focusing on vocational training and skills for women in prison, this project works towards the achievement of SDG4 on education, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG8 on decent work, SDG10 on reduced inequalities, SDG16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

Through a national project to improve the future of women in prison, the SI Union of Italy provided certified professional training courses that could be used to support women gain employment with the help of social cooperatives inside and outside prisons.

The SI Union of Italy signed a protocol agreement with the Italian Ministry of Justice in 2017, which was renewed in 2019, which allowed clubs to collaborate with prison authorities to provide the courses. So far 50 Soroptimist clubs in Italy have joined the initiative and have provided 60 courses on hairdressing, ice-cream making, seamstressing and librarianship. Thirty penitentiary institutions, equal to 60% of all Italian prisons with a women's section have been involved in the programme, and 30 partners and companies have supported and contributed to the project. 350 women attending the training courses have obtained their certificate diploma; they amount to 12% of the 2,500 women in prison in Italy.

The Environmental Pillar of Sustainable Development

All societies and economies are completely reliant upon a healthy environment to exist. Increasingly, the environment is connected to the ability to live peacefully as well — environmental degradation can exacerbate socio-economic strains, causing displacement, lack of access to food and water, income insecurity, and even conflict. Environmental damage is disproportionately caused by the Global North, yet it is the Global South and the people living there who experience the bulk of these impacts. The causes and effects of environmental degradation do not respect borders and soon it will be impossible to reverse the damage already caused. Immediate, united global action is needed in order to save humanity from the existential threat of climate change and environmental damage.

Environmental sustainability is fundamentally intertwined with human rights; human rights cannot be enjoyed without a safe, clean and healthy environment.[xi] Yet, environments across the globe continue to be put at risk and exploited despite international commitments, international law, regional instruments, and national laws. When the environment's integrity continues to be undermined, consequently the human rights of all women and girls are also undermined and violated. Human-created damage to environment can be a contributing factor to socio-economic problems. However, actions to rebuild and regenerate the environment can support social cohesion and peacebuilding. It is critical that policies and programmes recognise this interconnection, and facilitate and fund actions that rehabilitate environments and consequently, communities.

To ensure all people have access to water, food, and a safe, clean and healthy environment, it is vital that a gender-transformative approach is taken. A gender-transformative approach will address the disproportionate impacts that environmental damage can have upon women and girls. Additionally, programmes should empower women and girls to become stewards of their environment. Too often water, hygiene and sanitation equipment and facilities are built in rural areas and women and girls are not taught how to maintain them. Women farmers and rural and indigenous women often have invaluable knowledge about their environment and how it has changed, yet frequently this local expertise is ignored and disregarded. For women to be agents of sustainable development, including for the environmental pillar of sustainable development, they must be empowered as participants, leaders and decision-makers at all levels.

Recommendations

Based upon the projects outlined below, Soroptimist International recommends that Governments take the following actions and steps:

- Increase efforts to partner with local CSOs who have the on-the-ground knowledge of environmental and social needs, which can make projects most successful. CSOs frequently hold a position of trust within communities, making them best-placed to enact sensitive project and to work from the grassroots up.

- Support environmental sustainability and improve environmental quality that can bring people together and reduce risks of violence. This approach should be included in peacebuilding work as well as for activities that seek to a reduction in the risk of violence.

- Improve living conditions and improve access to sustainable technologies, to ensure people are able to take action to preserve their environment. Environmental sustainability can be closely linked with people's resources. Sustainable technologies also have additional benefits, including health benefits. Global cooperation is needed to reduce barriers to sustainable technologies and close the gendered technology divide.

- Expand and enhance economic opportunities for women and girls through well-planned environmental 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.

- Make safe water available to all, particularly those in rural areas. It is eminently achievable to ensure universal access to safe water and sanitation for all by 2030. international support must be stepped up to support local action in order to achieve this in an environmentally sustainable way.

- Use a gender-transformative approach to all policies and programmes and equip women and girls with the knowledge they need to maintain and use safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by poor water access.

Culture and Peace: Kenya, SI Eldoret

As this project focuses on the intersections of peace, the environment, awareness raising and education, it contributes to achieving SDG3 on good health and wellbeing, SDG4 on education, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG6 on clean water and sanitation, SDG7 on clean energy, SDG11 on sustainable communities, SDG15 on life on land, SDG16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

Uasin County, in the North Rift Region of Kenya has been greatly affected by political upheaval, and women and children frequently bear the brunt of these impacts even long after the elections have taken place. These elections bring violence with them — homes and property are often destroyed and people in these communities are left with psychological trauma. To tackle this broader environment of political violence and tension, SI Eldoret organised and participated in peace-promotion programmes and worked in partnership with other organisations committed to peace-building, promoting justice and conflict resolution.

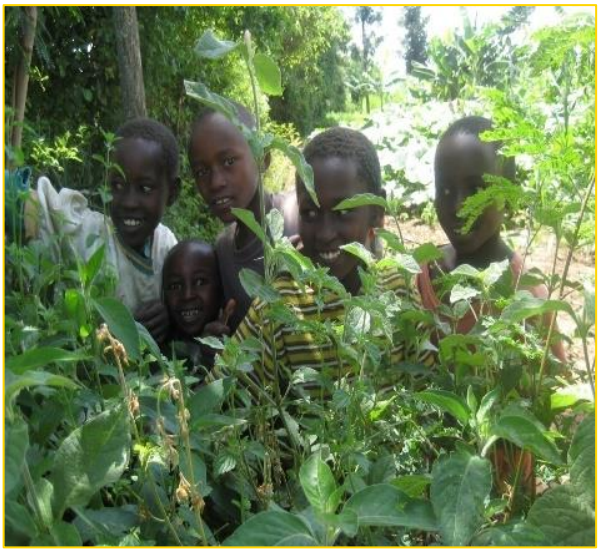
SI Eldoret first started working on peace-building projects in 2007, following post-election violence

that saw some of the worst forms of violence recorded in Kenya. Recognised as an organisation who had been working with women in violence-affected communities, members of SI Eldoret received training from mental health professionals which allowed them to offer psychosocial support to victims at the camps for internally displaced people were able to recover from their trauma. Crucially, by holding a position of trust with women in the community, SI Eldoret was able to effectively provide these services to those in need. It was also during this time that the Club recognised the need to provide financial assistance to women, with many being rural small-scale farmers who had lost their livelihoods. They needed to be quickly re-equipped with seeds and agricultural equipment to allow them to re-empower themselves and return to the livelihoods they were skilled in. Combining psychosocial services with economic empowerment, SI Eldoret was able to support women to become survivors, rather than victims, enabling their social re-integration and finding social commonalities rather than differences. Unfortunately, election-related violence has continued to be a problem in Kenya and Uasin County, so, SI Eldoret has continued its work in peace-building, justice and conflict resolution, and in particular ensuring women are included in these activities, therefore addressing both underlying inequalities (SDG10) and the need for peaceful societies (SDG16).

Peace, the Environment and Climate Change: Trees for Peace

Seeing the value of emphasising what communities have in common, and challenges that unite them, SI Eldoret has used the need to address climate change issues to bring communities together. After the post-election violence that happened in 2008, it was essential that the different tribes living in Eldoret were brought together to avert a potential crisis. Environmental challenges were affecting everyone regardless of what tribe they belonged to — with impacts of climate change being indiscriminate, it provided an opportunity to unite a potentially divided community. Working with the provincial administration and others SI Eldoret encouraged community members to plant trees in their home compounds during the rainy season, and for every ten trees planted, the club would provide a solar lamp. This doubled the environmental benefits — not only do trees help limit desertification and absorb carbon, but the solar lamps helped reduce reliance on kerosene lamps which were affecting women's and children's health due to toxic fumes within the home. Use of the solar lamps had the direct consequence of ensuring girls were able to study.

The tree-planting project supported this through people-to-people dialogue and by consolidating the community. For household compounds that planted fifty trees or more, SI Eldoret equipped them with a water tank. This provided the household with clean water, and meant women and girls no longer needed to travel significant distances to rivers to collect water.



By timing the tree planting and raising environmental awareness during the rainy season, SI Eldoret intends to continue with this programme as the country gears up for a referendum in June, and in light of the upcoming elections next year.

Recognising the power of women as change makers, SI Eldoret has built upon this project by teaching women how to build fireless cookers and kitchens in their homes, further reducing indoor pollution and improving health. By removing the need to collect firewood and water, responsibilities that largely fall to women and girls, SI Eldoret addressed the time

poverty as well. Without these responsibilities, women and girls were now able to better use their time for education and economic opportunities. As part of the programme, the women who participated became more aware about what they could do to address climate change within their communities, and started to mobilise and empower others. Working with over 200 women and their households, SI Eldoret was able to impact close to 1000 people in their community.

Chamas the Voice

No more teary eyes as women group develops smoke-free 'Chepkube' jiko

BY ONYANGO K'ONYANGO AND FLORENTINA MONG'ARE

70
The number of women who have benefitted from the Kalyet Women's Group initiative

2015
The year Paris Agreement was adopted by 196 Parties at COP 21 in Paris in France.

Health benefits

Multi-tasking

Esther Chepkemboi (left) with Sophie Koech, coordinator of Soroptimist International demonstrate how the *chepkube* works. JARED NYATAYA | NATION

"We needed something that would involve everyone and bring together the different communities taking into account their different cultural norms and practices. Tree planting and environmental issues in general, cut across everyone, and the benefits are felt across the board, no matter the tribe, community, race or colour. Additionally, women bore the greatest brunt of the violence. We knew, if we could get them on board to realise how climate change affected their livelihoods, then the whole community would change the way they look at the environment … a destroyed environment was not one they wanted to live in or bequeath their children. It was a project that cut across all genders, ages, and tribes, and didn't have prejudices so it was easily adopted."

Winnie Maru, President SI Eldoret, Kenya

Aiming to continue and keep building their work on Culture and Peace, SI Eldoret now intends to develop capacity building programmes for women to enable them to be peace mediators, but also to ensure that they are able to recognise and report signs of conflict before violence breaks out. Frequently, it is vital to address these early warning signs to prevent violence and to support work on promoting a culture of peace, tolerance and good governance.

Clean Wells – healthy rural women: Ukraine, SI Chernihiv

By ensuring safe, clean water provision in a rural community, this project supports SDG3 on good health and wellbeing, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG6 on clean water and sanitation, and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

One in three women in Ukraine live in rural areas and more women than men comprise the rural population. Rural women often face intersecting forms of discrimination based upon their gender, where they live, their age, their income, whether they are displaced and other factors. Additionally, rural areas often have poorer facilities and less infrastructure which impacts the quality of life of those living there. Seeking to support women living in rural areas, SI Chernihiv received request from village authorities to clean 80 wells which provide women living in these villages — many of whom live below the poverty line, are elderly and disabled — with their only source of water. As the wells had not

been cleaned in a long time, there were risks that the water had become contaminated and in some cases it was no longer possible to get water from the wells because the water supply had become blocked.

Working with village authorities, SI Chernihiv, with the support of SI Clubs in Denmark, was able to find a specialist to analyse the water and ensure that the wells would provide safe water when it was cleaned.

Realising that many in the country might be unaware of the challenges facing many rural women in Ukraine, SI Chernihiv appealed to local and regional media to share the story and spread information. They also used social media to raise awareness and create more action on this social issue. Accordingly, SI Chernihiv succeeded in gaining the attention of local government bodies and they began to directly participate in the project.

Baba Nina's Story

Baba Nina, an 84-year-old woman lives in a village near a war zone in the eastern part of Ukraine with her two children. She is a retired skilled plasterer, but despite being retired she still works hard to support her family. This includes by using her garden for subsistence farming.

There is a well near Baba Nina's house, but it has not been cleaned for many years and consequently the water disappeared about a year ago. This meant that to get water, Baba Nina had to use her son's old pram to carry empty plastic bottles to collect water from her neighbours by walking regularly 5 km all by herself!

When the well was cleaned, the water came back. Immediately, this brought an end to a sever situation where people were living without access to water and where Baba Nina was having to walk 5km to get water.

"Baba Nina was very happy, she said that it seemed impossible for her to believe a positive change could happen, it was a real miracle! The Soroptimists changed her life for the better.

Unfortunately, we live in a country where there has been war for six years already weakening every day a little more the economy (8 out of 10 pensioners live below the poverty line). This project ensures us that together we can make a difference and support rural women."

— Victoria Filatova, Secretary of SI Chernihiv

Human Rights as Cross-cutting for all Pillars of Sustainable Development

Realising the human rights of all women and girls is fundamental to the achievement of the sustainable development goals and the eradication of inequality. Human rights are relevant to all three pillars of sustainable development — the social, economic and environmental pillars. It will be impossible to realise human rights and achieve gender equality without strengthening human rights-based action in all these pillars, and by building a human rights-based approach into all sustainable development efforts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, across the world women's and girls' rights have been infringed upon. Inequality in educational opportunities, economic inequality, negative health outcomes, and rates of gender-based violence have all increased. As these trends are usually systematic and appropriate actions have not been taken to prevent these gendered impacts of the pandemic, they can constitute human rights violations. Immediate action must be taken to protect and realise the human rights of women and girls in all their diversity and across their life course.

The Soroptimist project included in this section demonstrates how addressing human rights across all the pillars of sustainable development can facilitate the eradication of gender inequality. This project in Indonesia was initially started in response to a natural disaster and sought to ensure that women and girls returning to their homes to rebuild their community had access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. This socio-environmental work was then connected with economic empowerment. Realising many of the women had lost their source of income, the project expanded to offer retraining opportunities, including in water management. This meant that local women would be able to monitor and maintain their own water supply, giving them control over their living conditions and local environment while providing women with increased economic opportunity.

However, economic recovery from crisis takes time, and during these periods of recovery many women may still live in persistent and intergenerational poverty, experience financial pressures or struggle to provide for their families. This can place women and girls at risk of gender-based violence, particularly forms of violence which are exploitative and claim to provide economic security. This was the experience of the Soroptimists running the Indonesia project — during times of economic insecurity, they witnessed an increase in cases of child, early and forced marriage. They then adapted their project to ensure that this social phenomenon was addressed, and the human rights of women and girls achieved. It is by using a human rights-based approach and recognising the interconnected nature of the three pillars of sustainable development that will ensure the success of sustainable development programmes.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based upon Soroptimist International's human rights-based work. All states should take action on these recommendations in order to realise the human rights of women and girls in their diversity and across the life course:

- Intersectional understandings of gender must be integrated into human rights frameworks to prevent gender considerations simply being treated as a programmatic 'add-on'. Without an intersectional, human rights-based approach it will be impossible to achieve the 2030 Agenda, and gender equality efforts will continue to be less effective or even harmed.
- Sustainable development programmes should recognise and address the interconnections between the pillars of sustainable development and must adopt a human right-based approach to ensure success.
- Evaluating human rights outcomes of sustainable development programmes should be used for monitoring and evaluating those programmes and included within monitoring and evaluation procedures. Progress measured by both qualitative and quantitative measures for human rights must be used as a marker of success for programmes.
- Governments, agencies, CSOs and other stakeholders should all work with communities and provide them with information to combat phenomenon that contribute to early, child and forced marriage, including FGM, bridal kidnapping, so-called 'marry-your-rapist-laws', trafficking, and other practices.
- Alternatives to child, early and forced marriage must be provided to ensure the eradication of these practices. This must include increasing educational and economic opportunities for women and girls, ensuring that cost is not a barrier to accessing education.
- Men and boys must also be engaged with as allies to achieve gender equality and to eliminate child, early and forced marriage.
- Efforts to eradicate poverty must use a gender-transformative approach, recognising that poverty eradication efforts can contribute to the achievement of other Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG5 on gender equality.

The Trafficking of Women and Girls in Indonesia – Awareness, Advocacy and Action: Indonesia, SI Jakarta

This project takes a multifaceted approach to the challenges facing a community, and addresses the challenges of safe sanitation facilities, child, early and force marriage, human trafficking, gender equality and economic empowerment. Accordingly it supports the achievement of SDG1 on eradicating poverty, SDG4 on education, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG6 on clean water and sanitation, SDG8 on decent work, SDG10 on reducing inequalities, SDG11 on sustainable communities, SDG16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, and SDG17 on partnerships for sustainable development.

While working on their project 'Lombok Recovery: Water, Shelter and Capacity Building', SI Jakarta observed the serious social issue of child marriages. Since 2019, they documented cases of girls under the ages of 15 being kidnapped from the Rebuk Satu village and being forced into marriage within weeks. Some of the girls identified as being child brides were as young as twelve. This practice of "bridal kidnapping" is now widely recognised to be a form

of human trafficking as well as a form of gender-based violence. After the daughter of one of the weavers involved in the Lombok Recovery Project became a child bride, SI Jakarta decided they had to take action, and used their connections within the community to raise awareness and identify community-based solutions to resolve this problem that devastates peoples' lives.

The first steps SI Jakarta took was to collaborate with the Titian Foundation, a partner in the Lombok Recovery Project, to initiate community awareness programmes and to work with the women and girls of Rebuk Satu. In these awareness sessions, SI Jakarta shared information about the impacts of child marriage, showing how those who become child brides are more likely to experience violence, poorer health outcomes, have higher maternal and infant mortality rates, and leave education early and with fewer qualifications, as well as the impact upon the human rights of girls who are forced into child and early marriage. Early in 2020, SI Jakarta's Project Field Officer was able to establish a youth discussion group, which meant young people in the village could engage with a range of social issues, including child marriage. It was through these sessions that many of the teenage boys in the village saw early marriage as a crucial issue. The boys shared that they did not want to be married young either — they felt there were inexperienced and ill-equipped to take on the role of a caring husband and father at such a young age. Through all these different mechanisms and forms of community outreach and consultation, SI Jakarta was able to collect views on how these issues could be tackled. Many of the women that SI Jakarta worked with saw early and child marriage as a way out of poverty and saw few other options than to keep these traditions. Since running these community sessions, SI Jakarta have been approached by a number of women in the village, seeking advice for alternatives to child marriage and how to avoid this fate for their daughters.

To complement these awareness raising activities, SI Jakarta used a capacity building component of the project to ensure that the young women and girls of Rebuk Satu had the skills they needed to improve their lives and socio-economic position. By providing educational and training opportunities, a lack of available education or concerns about how a woman may support herself will no longer be reasons to marry a girl off early or as a child. To expand this part of the programme, SI Jakarta is exploring the possibility of providing scholarships to teenage girls to support their staying in school, as economic pressures can contribute to early drop-out rates. These scholarships and support would also be provided to girls who are already married, so that they too can complete their education and learn key skills which will help them support their families.

With this knowledge and experience, to recognise World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, SI Jakarta hosted a webinar on the Human Trafficking of Women and Girls in Indonesia. This event was attended by 176 people, and was carried out in collaboration with the Indonesian Commission Against Violence Towards Women (KOMNAS Perempuan) and the NGO Thalita Kum, as both organisations are also involved in combatting trafficking in Indonesia.

The COVID pandemic has exacerbated many of the issues that put girls in jeopardy for being trafficked-poverty, migration, armed conflict, domestic work, and online exploitation. At the same time, the UN and national governments have had to divert their often limited resources away from initiatives to identify, prevent and protect against human trafficking and toward the health crisis instead.

Jacqueline Shapiro, SI UN Representative

The Humanitarian-Development Nexus and COVID-19

Despite agreement that how humanitarian action is carried out impacts the efficacy of sustainable development efforts, and that the most successful sustainable development work will increase resilience and decrease need during humanitarian crises, breaking down the silos between these two sectors is continuing to prove difficult. During the COVID-19 pandemic, fully addressing the humanitarian-development nexus is becoming even more difficult, as we return to old, familiar ways of working, even though it is known that these methodologies are not the most effective. Rather than using default approaches, the pandemic should be seized as an opportunity to try new ways of working to ensure the most effective outcomes possible. This must involve integrating a gender transformative or gender-responsive approach into all programmes. By using these approaches, it's possible to recognise not only how women are disproportionately affected by humanitarian crisis and benefit from sustainable development efforts, but also that women can and should be agents of change. By working directly with women in these situations, their vulnerabilities can be addressed, and families and communities can be reached quickly and effectively.

In the two Soroptimist projects outlined in this section, women who have been forced to leave their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic, either due to natural disasters or because of political and socioeconomic instability and widespread violence were given support that addressed their needs. Responding beyond the immediate humanitarian requirements, these projects were able to promote development outcomes, including access to education, improving economic empowerment, reducing the spread of disease and addressing risks of violence. CSOs like Soroptimist International who are already on-the-ground when crisis hits and who are among the first responders, must be considered partners in achieving the humanitarian-development nexus.

Recommendations

Based upon the knowledge gained through Soroptimists' projects, Soroptimist International gives the following recommendations. States should take action on these recommendations in order to implement the humanitarian development nexus, and to ensure that programmes that address the nexus contribute to the achievement of gender equality:

- Local organisations must be partnered with during humanitarian situations, as they know the local community and its immediate and pre-existing needs best. These partnerships should be continued as humanitarian efforts transition into sustainable development work to help facilitate the humanitarian-development nexus.

- Emergency shelters must respond to contemporary health needs, which includes providing adequate spacing to prevent disease spread, the quick establishment of safe and accessible water, sanitation and hygiene facilitates, using mosquito nets, and other factors relevant to local circumstances.

- When and where possible, emergency aid should support people being able to stay in their own homes. This may require rapidly providing temporary fixes to roofs and walls, providing water, solar lamps and cookers, and other resources. Whenever possible, sustainable appliances should be used, especially as many of these appliances do not rely on access to electricity, which may not be available, and because these appliances aid in sustainable development and produce improved outcomes.

- Women must be recognised as agents of sustainable development, including during humanitarian situations. By working with women and channelling aid through women it is possible to promote effective and sustainable outcomes, not only for individuals but also for families and communities.

- Collaboration with the local private sector during times of crisis should be improved, as working with local business can ensure necessary aid gets to those in need quickly, while also boosting the local economy, improving resilience and boosting broader recovery efforts.

- Disasters and crises reveal and compound existing inequalities, including gender inequality. This must be built into humanitarian responses to best support sustainable development, recovery and future resilience, through using a joined-up, gender transformative approach.

- Those identified as at risk, including women, during humanitarian situations should continue to receive support as programmes transfer towards being sustainable development programmes. To truly respond to need, the root causes of that need must be addressed, not just immediate need. Access to all levels of education, retraining programmes, economic support, access to childcare, and other services, are all vital during this transition to ensure sustainable outcomes which promote gender equality.

Caring Hands Cyclone Relief — India, SI Calcutta

In May 2020, the eastern coast of India was struck by a super cyclonic storm, communities already struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly those in the states of West Bengal and Orissa, faced further crisis. With many now homeless, and without food and basic necessities, SI Calcutta knew that it could contribute to relief work at the grassroots level by establishing temporary shelters. During times of crisis and disaster, it is organisations like Soroptimist International, already active in communities and working on-the-ground, who are often best placed to be first responders. They already know the needs of communities, where safe sites are, and can ensure that relief work is community-led.

Working in collaboration with the Research Institute for Human and Agricultural Development and the Sundarban Snehadan Foundation, SI Calcutta was able to act immediately to provide essential emergency shelter and support for 650 people. SI Calcutta ensured that the shelters contained mosquito nets to minimise the spread of diseases common after disasters, during humanitarian crises and in relief camps. In some cases where homes were not too badly damaged, SI Calcutta was able to provide temporary fixes to roofs to allow people to stay in their own homes until new homes could be provided.

While providing this emergency relief, SI Calcutta were particularly mindful in ensuring rural women were able to access the support they needed. During and after natural disasters and crises, rural women are at particular risk of being left behind — it is harder for them to access services, find alternative sources of income and they face higher risks of violence. In addition, many of these women are the main carers of their families and by channelling aid through rural women it's possible to support entire families and the broader community as well as individuals.

Physical but not Social Distancing — Trinidad and Tobago, SI San Fernando

The disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 upon women has been described by the UN Secretary General as a 'shadow epidemic'. Women's employment rates have dropped, and corresponding risks of poverty and food insecurity have increased. All of these factors mean that inequalities within countries are rising – and regression in gender equality is at the heart of these renewed challenges. To directly combat the food insecurity experience by women and their families due to the impacts of COVID-19, SI San Fernando identified two key groups of women in need of support. The first group were women who worked at a tourist centre in Brasso Seco, whose sector has been decimated by COVID-19 and as a result meant that they had lost their source of income. The second group were Venezuelan migrants who have been displaced from their own country, due to political and socioeconomic instability, and widespread violence, during a global pandemic.
Working in partnership with the La Romaine Migrant Support Group, SI San Fernando was able to conduct needs assessments and ensure aid was delivered in accordance with government social distancing protocols. By liaising with a supermarket chain SI San Fernando was able negotiate prices, discounts and the availability of free products that were most needed by the women and their families. Confined during lockdowns and without income, it was quickly discovered that as well as food, women were in need of cleaning products, clothes and books as with school closed these women were trying to educate their children without the necessary resources. SI San Fernando, like many other organisations who have supported their community during the COVID-19 pandemic, quickly discovered that the pandemic's impacts revealed and compounded the underlying inequalities and challenges that exist within society. SI San Fernando's intention is to continue to work to overcome these inequalities. Using this partnership developed during the pandemic to provide immediate relief to women in need, SI San Fernando is adopting a humanitarian-development nexus approach and is seeking to develop the project to ensure the women participants can access education and training that will empower them in the future social and employment environment.

Essential Implementation Approaches

Policy and Implementation Fundamentals

Gender equality is a human right and a precondition for the achievement of sustainable development — achieving sustainable development is impossible if half of humanity is denied their human rights and equal opportunities. CSOs, like Soroptimist International, have long understood that women are agents of development. It can be celebrated that all states have now also recognised women as agents of development. However, that recognition must transition into action and empowerment, ensuring that women are full, equal, effective and meaningful participants, leaders and decision-makers in all sustainable development processes. Efforts to achieve gender equality must be considered as a means of implementation and a critical policy measure for countries who want to achieve their full development potential.

To achieve the 2030 Agenda, States must adopt the inclusive, transformative thinking that gender mainstreaming allows. This approach has been used by feminist, women's and girl-led movements across the world. It is vital that States and agencies end siloed policy making processes in order to address the interconnected nature of all the Sustainable Development Goals.

Gender equality is not only a purpose and outcome of sustainable development, but a means of implementation. Gender mainstreaming, while long discussed, needs to be urgently implemented through laws, policies, programmes, financing and indicators. This should include reviewing current policies, programmes, laws, budgeting, indicators, data collection mechanisms and other means of implementation and review of the SDGs. As outlined by the UNDP, a gender approach can be applied to and area of sustainable development and any Sustainable Development Goal.[xii]

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how far behind the world is in ensuring that there are gender-equal policies that ensure the same outcomes and opportunities for women and girls as there is for men and boys. The pandemic has also reaffirmed how entrenched gender norms are, how they limit the realistic options available to women and girls, and how easy it is for us to fall back to harmful gender roles which do not support effective rebuilding after crises nor sustainable development more broadly. During the tragedy of this pandemic, we are presented with a unique opportunity to reform policies and practices to create a more gender-equal, sustainable and resilient world.

Now is the Time for Gender-Transformative Action

When the Sustainable Development Goals were first created, the need for 'gender-sensitive implementation' was often highlighted. However being gender-sensitive is no longer enough — states and all other stakeholders must be gender-transformative if we are to meet the ambitions of the goals. There are key differences between means of implementation that are gender-sensitive and those that are gender-responsive and gender-transformative. While gender-sensitive approaches are *aware* of gender inequalities and are adjusted in accordance with the realities of gender inequalities in society, those approaches do not fundamentally change those inequalities. Instead, gender-sensitive policies may perpetuate gender inequalities. Gender-responsive approaches acknowledge and consider the specific needs of people based upon their gendered experiences and needs. Importantly, these approaches *respond* to the realities of women and girls and try to make those realities better. While gender-responsive approaches are an improvement on gender-sensitive approaches, gender-transformative approaches provide for the kind of ambitious action needed to achieve all the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Gender-transformative approaches address the cause of gender-based inequalities and work to *transform* those inequalities by addressing harmful gender roles, norms and power relations. This means that gender-transformative approaches are essential for the achievement of gender equality.

Ambitious National Action Plans: Stepping-up Action for Sustainable Development

There must be a joined-up, gender-transformative approach across all policy areas to achieve gender equality and sustainable development. National action plans are a key tool to provide this. These national action plans must be forward looking and build on any already existing achievements. Plans should be able to review past policies critically, and be periodically reviewed to ensure all policy development and implementation is supported by verifiable and credible evidence in contemporary research. National action plans must address gender mainstreaming, financing for development, gender budgeting, and using national, regional and international law to support sustainable development.

Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming recognises that all policies and programmes are relevant to achieving gender equality and involves integrating a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes, and regulatory measures and spending programmes. However, using gender mainstreaming as a policy approach does not replace the need for targeted, women-specific policies and programmes that rectify inequality and discrimination. Nor is gender mainstreaming about adding a 'woman's component' into existing policies. Instead, it recognises all issues as women's issues.

Gender mainstreaming includes:

- Effective accountability mechanisms for monitoring progress that seeks out and includes the perspectives and experiences of women and girls in all their diversity and across the life course.
- Rigorous gender analyses that provide recommendations and requires gender budgeting to be carried out during the creation, implementation, assessment and evaluation levels of policies.
- Clear political will and allocation of full and adequate resources, including additional financial and human resources, to put gender mainstreaming into practice.
- Ensuring women's full, equal, effective and meaningful leadership, participation and input at all levels of decision-making.
- Gender budgeting, gender-differentiated statistics and indicators as critical components of gender mainstreaming, and to be used for all policies and actions.

Financing for Development and Gender Budgeting

Financing for development must directly tackle circumstances contributing to unequal outcomes; systematic and practical support from budgetary processes which buttress sustainable development is required. In times of economic downturn, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, states must ensure that policy responses take into account the differential priorities and needs of women, men, girls and boys and do not undermine the policies and plans that promote gender equality and women's empowerment. It is equally possible for financing for development to be gender-transformative through the full resourcing of services and feminist, women's rights and girl-led organisations and institutions; publicly allocate and track spending on gender equality; track and allocate overseas development assistance for gender equality; provide incentives and enable women to own assets and property; and ensure all new and existing global trade, financial and investment agreements contribute to gender equality, women's empowerment, labour standards and human rights.

Gender budgeting accounts for how budgetary processes, fiscal policies, revenues, expenditures and administrative procedures all impact, and are impacted by, gender inequality. Gender blind budgets, result in suboptimal decision making, disadvantage women and girls and slow sustainable development progress. Gender budgeting is a critical strategy to achieve gender equality by focusing on how public resources are collected and spent. It is grounded in a gender analysis, and requires budgets to be restructured incorporating a gender perspective at all levels of the budgetary process, including fiscal policies, revenues, expenditures and administrative procedures. This kind of analysis allows for the inclusion of key issues that are otherwise overlooked, such as the unpaid labour of women in the household and its economic effect on women, and the distribution of economic resources within families.

states are using the pandemic as a means to release themselves from their responsibilities to achieve gender equality.

During the COVID-19 pandemic funds for women's services have been cut, despite increasing demand and reliance on those services. Frequently CSOs are being relied on by states to provide the services states used to provide and to fill this gap. Women working conditions are declining, more women faced unemployment, and women were more likely to experience economic insecurity because of the pandemic. Where schools shut, women were expected to be workers, homemakers, teachers and care providers all at once. Government policies did little to address these clear inequalities. These actions mean that states are using the pandemic as a means to release themselves from their responsibilities to achieve gender equality. As a result, gender equality has gone backwards, and women and girls will be living with the impacts of the pandemic long into the future. The pandemic would be better responded to if a gender-transformative approach had been used and finances and resources were specifically dedicated to women's services. As under-resourced women's and feminist organisations frequently intervene in lieu of government services and social protection floors, as evidenced in this report, they must be supported as partners in sustainable development.

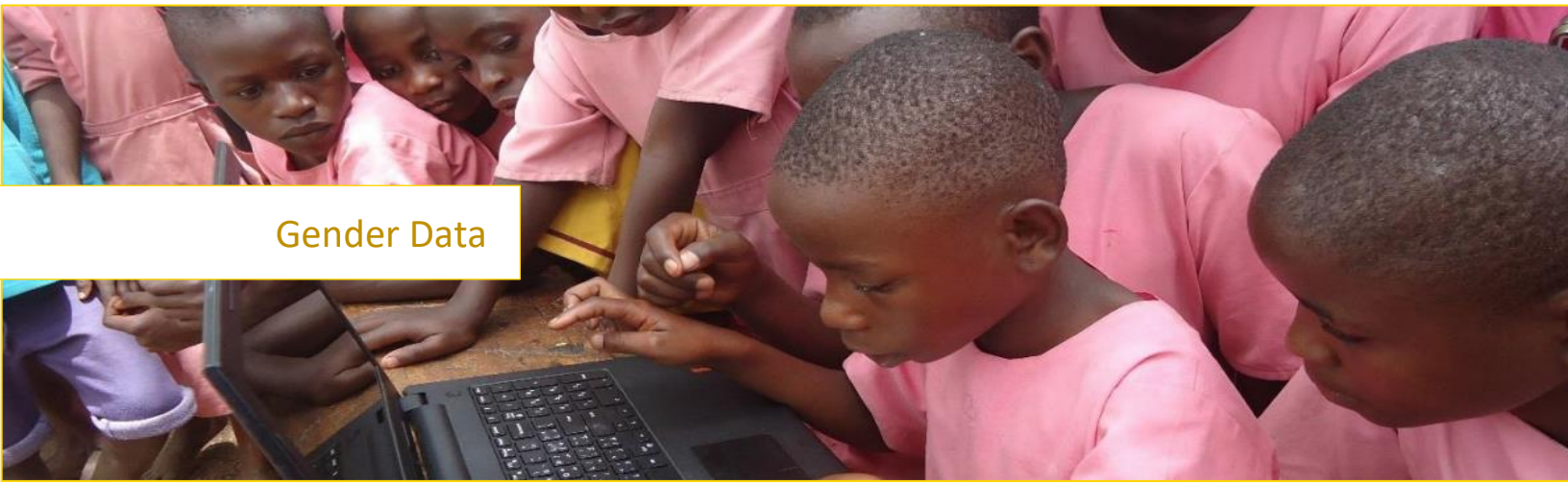
Using Law to Support Sustainable Development

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and gender equality is deeply interwoven with human rights. All people have a right to development, to health, to shelter, to peace, to equality, among others, all relevant to the Sustainable Development Goals under review this year. States already have a variety of legal obligations that facilitate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Multiple human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights are legally binding to States Parties. These treaties require States to act progressively to realise the right to social protection without discrimination or retrogression. All new initiatives must comply with responsibilities of governments to secure the rights and governance of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, including to their land and marine territories, and value and recognize the important role of women providing conditions for them to have decent work and social protection.

To support sustainable development and gender equality all states must sign, ratify and remove reservations from CEDAW as well as other human rights instruments. That states are withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention is extremely concerning. Withdrawal from the Convention demonstrates a lack of political will to prevent, investigate and prosecute gender-based violence which is a fundamental barrier to sustainable development. While the Istanbul Convention is a European instrument, the Convention is still open to accession from other states and all states should offer their support to the Istanbul Convention. Labour laws must be adopted, implemented and improved to ensure all workers are safe, paid a living wage, and are treated with dignity and respect. States should also support and implement the developing area of environmental law, especially international environmental law, recognising that all environmental policies have regional and global impacts that go beyond national borders. International economic law, highly relevant to sustainable development and made up of bilateral and multilateral agreements, often de-prioritises people and the environment. It is vital that international economic law be reformed to recognise that economies are there to serve people and the planet, not the other way round.

Capacity Building

Since the Sustainable Development Goals were created in 2015, it has been clear that many state, agencies and other stakeholders lack capacity for the full and effective implementation of the goals. To ensure all benefit equally from the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals it is essential that there is greater support and cooperation for capacity building. The overseas development assistance target of 0.7% of gross national income must be met by donors as a matter of urgency. This assistance must not be conditional, and must support capacity building. Mutually respectful training, knowledge-exchange, and other form of support in data collection and analysis, policy development and implementation, justice provision and others can all be enhanced through capacity building efforts. It is essential that more institutional support is provided between states and by UN agencies, especially for building capacity for gender-equality efforts and environmental protections.



Gender Data

Gender data requires both qualitative and quantitative data, as well as gender-differentiated statistics and indicators. Only when all types of data are used it is possible to ascertain the true realities of women's and girls' lives and the extent to which they are benefitting from sustainable development efforts. Data collection methodologies, indicators and the approaches used to evaluate data must all be adjusted to ensure that data is truly representative and complete. Unrepresentative or incomplete data is misleading, harmful, and obscures the lived realities of all women and girls which ultimately contributes to perpetuating the barriers to achieving gender equality.

Gender-differentiated statistics provide a numerical representation of the situational differences and inequalities between women and men in all areas of life, whilst gender differentiated indicators serve as a means to measure reductions in gender inequality. Gender-differentiated statistics and indicators should be collected nationally, regionally and globally in order to measure gender gaps and consequently adjust sustainable development programmes to rectify inequalities. All data should be disaggregated on the basis of age, gender, sex characteristics, geography, income, disability, race and ethnicity and other factors relevant to monitoring inequalities, as a minimum. It is vital that data is collected on the individual level, as household data surveys obscure inequalities within households, in particular gender inequality.

Qualitative data seeks to describe phenomena, experiences and perspectives that can be observed but not measured. This type of data therefore assumes that people's realities are dynamic and dependent upon a multitude of factors that numbers alone are not able to capture. The aim of qualitative research and data is to understand the social reality of individuals and groups by establishing 'how' or 'why' particular social phenomenon, behaviours and experiences exist. As gender inequality is a socially created and experienced phenomenon and women's vulnerabilities are not intrinsic, qualitative data is essential in understanding what programmes to eradicate gender inequality should be and how policy areas intersect. In contrast, quantitative data focuses on measuring phenomena numerically, which assumes that there is a fixed and measurable reality. These statistics require qualitative data for interpretation to ensure that policies and programmes are effective.

Call to Action

This report addresses the critical importance that taking a gender-transformative approach to addressing the COVID-19 pandemic has for the achievement of gender equality and sustainable development. SI projects show how women can be drivers of sustainable development, transforming the lives of individuals and their communities. Now states must step-up and commit to the gender-transformative policies to rectify the regression on gender equality and redress the fact that women and girls, especially those who experience intersecting and multiple forms of discrimination, have been hardest hit by the pandemic. SI calls upon states and all development actors to expedite efforts to achieve the SDGs and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic by:

- Ensuring programmes to achieve the SDGs are inclusive and accessible for all – this requires renewed and increased efforts to reach those who experience multiple forms of discrimination and those who live in vulnerable and marginalised communities.
- Requiring all actions to implement and achieve the SDGs and address the COVID-19 pandemic adopt a human rights-based approach, including the human rights of women and girls under international law. All states should ratify and remove their reservations from CEDAW and realise their obligations under other human rights treaties.
- Expediting action to remove all barriers to gender equal opportunities in the public, private, economic and social spheres and scale-up action to ensure women's full, equal, effective and meaningful participation in all levels of leadership, decision-making and implementation, including in all COVID-19 recovery efforts.
- Ensuring national budgetary spending and all forms of financing for development use gender-budgeting to use funds most effectively and efficiently for sustainable development and COVID-19 recovery, recognising that funds have been redirected away from essential services.
- Taking urgent steps to ensure that all states, communities and homes are free from all forms of gender-based violence, especially as rates of violence have increased during the pandemic. This will require cultural programmes, working with communities and the allyship of men and boys.
- Responding to the impacts of natural disasters, humanitarian situations and other crisis through systems and programmes that address the humanitarian-development nexus, ensuring gender-equal crisis-response, improved resilience and sustainable development.
- Continuing to develop capacities for data collection, interpretation and analysis, including the creation of new qualitative indicators. Understanding the quality of sustainable development activities is vital to assessing whether the SDGs have been achieved.

The current global context of the COVID-19 pandemic, impending economic challenges, climate change, increased migration, and conflict means that we need the SDGs more than ever. The success of the SDGs requires the concerted and collective actions of all stakeholders. As well as increased political will, we need determined action to ensure the gender-sensitive and gender-responsive implementation of the SDGs.

Conclusions

It is essential that the focus of future policies and mechanisms that contribute to the empowerment and equality for all women and girls must have a gender-transformative, human right-based approach and address the specific needs of vulnerable groups. With increasing inequalities and the impacts upon all women and girls created by the COVID-19 pandemic being described as a "shadow epidemic", concerted action must be taken to address gender equality in all COVID recovery plans, programmes and actions. Women and girls have been hardest hit by the pandemic, especially those who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Gender-transformative, targeted action must be taken to reach these marginalised groups as they are being left behind in sustainable development. It is vital that it is recognised that the realities of these inequalities are created by policy decisions taken by states and other stakeholders. Immediate action must be taken to rectify these discriminatory policies. It is frequently civil society organisations that bring the real life impacts of these policy choices to light. Therefore, the knowledge and role that CSOs have in sustainable development and COVID-19 recovery has to be acknowledged, and more must be done to improve collaboration with, and support for, the essential work CSOs do.

The following actions and policies should be implemented, as they will aid the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and full recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Implementation efforts must use gender mainstreaming and gender-transformative and human rights-based approaches and principles, including gender budgeting, gender data and evaluation methodologies.
- Programmes and projects should be implemented in consultation with stakeholders, including all women and girls, and in response to their needs.
- Develop and introduce qualitative data measures.
- Promote and ensure the use of available technologies to increase access to quality education and means to social participation and economic empowerment, particularly for women and girls living in vulnerable situations.
- Take action to include women in humanitarian action and use gender-transformative approaches to realise the humanitarian-development nexus, to ensure the success of sustainable development.
- Take urgent action to fully resource essential services and social protection floors which are required for the achievement of gender equality, ensuring that funds are distributed to achieve this aim.
- Establish effective, accountable and gender sensitive monitoring systems and promote capacity building, including the involvement of NGOs and civil society.

[i] https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/report/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en-1.pdf
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