



## **Economic and Social Council**

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### **Commission on the Status of Women**

#### **Fifty-seventh session**

4-15 March 2013

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives**

#### **Statement submitted by Soroptimist International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



## Statement

Soroptimist International brings 90,000 voices to the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women to ask one very basic question — how have we so blatantly failed half of the world’s population?

The organization is a global movement, working to transform the lives of women and girls across the socio-economic, political and geographic spectrum. Close to 90,000 women are part of this movement, in over 3,000 communities worldwide. Collectively, we demand to know why we are still having conversations and international conferences talking about the problem of violence against women and girls without seeing any significant reduction in incidence or prevalence.

It has been nearly 30 years since the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, where the issue of violence against women and girls as a violation of human rights was first widely accepted and drawn from the private sphere into the public sphere. Nevertheless, after 30 years of discussion, policymaking, testing of interventions and sharing of best practice, we are still faced with the same global pandemic of gender-based violence. We still know that one in three women will experience violence in her lifetime. We still read about cases such as Malala Yousafzai’s. We still live in a world where violence against women and girls persists as a weapon of war. We come to the fifty-seventh session of the Commission to ask the question — why?

Soroptimist International believes that we are asking this question because we have made changes to laws, to crimes and to punishment, but we have not made changes to society, to relationships or to the underlying factors which allow violence to happen in the first place. Most approaches to violence against women have been top-down and not bottom-up.

Eliminating violence against women and girls is the responsibility of the State, but it is also the responsibility of every man, woman, girl and boy across the globe. Prevention must be contextualized, culturally specific and tailored to each community. We need both the top-down approach that we have had, through international conventions and laws, and the bottom-up approach that we, arguably, have not had, through meaningful societal participation and change.

As a global voice for women, the organization brings the following thoughts, opinions, and experiences from those at the “coal face”, who share what violence against women and girls means at the grass-roots level in communities around the world:

1. **Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on the impact of armed conflict on women, human trafficking, the Arab Spring, sex selection, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, honour killing, maternal health, rape, harassment, the girl child, malaria/tuberculosis/AIDS, pay equity and forced marriage:** when dealing with issues like these, we should remain mindful of the fact that they all fall under the umbrella of violence against women. We should not look at these issues in silos. Instead we should look at them all as pieces of the larger problem, which is violence against women. By focusing on the broader problem we will be ensuring that all forms of violence against women are brought to the forefront rather than just those forms that are temporally in the public spotlight (Canada).

2. **We are not putting the resources into making sure that those women are safe. I think that's where we need to lobby our Government to say that it's an important resource that we cannot just wipe away** (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland). A lack of resources, particularly financial, is a commonly felt barrier to addressing violence against women and girls. Investing in prevention is much more cost-effective than waiting until violence has occurred. Although we will never know the true cost of violence against women and girls, estimates put it in the billions (worldwide).

3. **[Incidents of violence against women and girls] happen in my country, too. In my town, around my corner** (United Kingdom). Many communities fail to recognize the violence which occurs in their own backyards. Violence against women and girls occurs in every community, in different forms and to different degrees.

4. **We now need to be telling young women in communities about what they need to do when they become aware of relationships that involve domestic violence and the fact that is it an individual responsibility for us to get involved and help the victims out** (Australia). Violence against women and girls, more often than not, is still in the bubble of the "private sphere", placing it out of the reach of the hands of not only the State, but of other community members who have a responsibility and an obligation to take action. Everyone needs to be involved to see the watershed change necessary to truly eliminate gender-based violence.

5. **Blaming substances for the cause makes it so that the real issue isn't identified. That's a dangerous trap** (United States of America). Often, it is easier to address a superficial aspect of violence, rather than digging under the surface and facing up to the hard realities of why violence against women and girls is still occurring at such pandemic levels.

6. **Women are expected to be obedient and submissive** (Solomon Islands). In many communities, traditional gender roles still permeate daily life, silencing women and allowing violence to thrive.

7. **We [cannot work] in isolation, we can't just work with women and girls. We have to work with men and boys because we're all one community together** (Papua New Guinea). To move from rhetoric into action, entire communities must work together to create sustainable change.

To see change, we need the Soroptimist International model: educate, empower and enable opportunities, as expressed in the following statements: there is just one way to stop violence against women, and that is by educating the whole community (El Salvador); by educating we can make decisions to change our lives (Rwanda); we know our rights and that makes the men less powerful (Senegal); it is our duty to go into society and produce the response of those women who are silent, powerless and do not have access to information (The Gambia).

With these voices echoing in the background, Soroptimist International therefore calls upon Governments, civil society and all members of society to truly listen and effect change, with the following recommendations:

- Prioritize and adequately resource policies, programmes and interventions with education, empowerment and enabling opportunities at their core, not just for victims, survivors or perpetrators, but for all men, women, boys and girls as accountable community members

- Recognize that by addressing the pandemic of violence against women and girls both from the top-down (through legislation and justice systems) and the bottom-up (through whole community participation and buy-in) we will eventually make it possible to “meet in the middle” and see meaningful, lasting change
- Institutionalize the responsibilities and obligations of the State and individual members of society to actively tackle the root causes of violence against women and girls
- Ensure that violence against women and girls is not labelled “private” and thus out of the reach of the hands of the State and/or the community
- Ensure that actions taken to eliminate violence against women and girls — focused on prevention or resolution — are systems-based and holistic, rather than project-based and vertical
- End any and all approaches, activities or policies which promulgate the victim/saviour dichotomy, and ensure meaningful, respectful and human-rights-based approaches to eliminating violence against women and girls

At the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2012, the organization partnered with the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts and World Young Women’s Christian Association to develop a list of priority actions for Governments. We recall those here:

- Understand and respond to the fact that women and girls are not a homogenous category and experience violence in many different ways, based on geographic, political, economic, social, and cultural contexts and backgrounds
- Invest in the primary prevention of violence against girls and young women by equipping all young people — both girls and boys — with the tools to recognize violence, to negotiate healthy, respectful relationships and to understand that everyone has the right to live a life free from violence
- In partnership with girls and young women and civil society, ensure that programmes and services are both gender- and age-appropriate, especially in providing access to girl-friendly safe spaces
- Strengthen legal frameworks and systems of justice to be responsive to the unique needs of girls and women and, where necessary, enact and enforce new laws to prevent, prosecute and punish all cases of violence against girls and young women
- Ensure that robust systems are in place to collect, analyse and act upon data on violence against girls and young women
- Develop and implement adequately-funded, long-term comprehensive national action plans on violence against women and girls which pay particular attention to and are developed in consultation with girls and young women
- Invest in and prioritize accessible, acceptable, available and good-quality education and training, both formal and non-formal, for girls, boys, adult women and adult men, as key to achieving gender equality and eliminating violence against girls and young women.