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**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”**

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 is a grass-roots organization that speaks on behalf of 80,000 women from 3,000 communities in 130 countries and territories worldwide. Since 1921, Soroptimists have united around the principles of educating, empowering and enabling women and girls locally, nationally and internationally. All of Soroptimist International's positions are based on the voices, perspectives and opinions of these women and girls.

Achieving gender equality is a cross-cutting issue that requires the commitment of Governments. Soroptimists are calling for a global increase in political will to confront gender inequality. Progress has been made, but the underlying structural barriers that make gender equality something to aspire to rather than a reality, not only remain but in some cases have increased.

Since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Soroptimists have played a role in its implementation. A global survey of women conducted by Soroptimist International 15 years ago found that the most important issues for Soroptimists and the communities that they work with were: violence committed against women and girls, women as leaders and decision makers and access to education for women and girls. It is extremely disappointing that the areas of concern, identified barriers and comments made over the past 20 years by Soroptimists are still relevant today.

Soroptimists are committed to implementing the Platform for Action, and are taking action on the identified key areas of concern: violence committed against women and girls, women as leaders and decision makers and access to education for women and girls. To change, we need the Soroptimist model: educate, empower and enable. We must listen to women to effect the change that they need.

As a global voice for women, Soroptimist International brings grass-roots perspectives to the 20-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 2015, and proposes that the areas set out below be addressed to ensure the achievement of equality.

Violence committed against women and girls

The lack of progress in this area since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action is unacceptable. Although changes to laws have been made, changes to society have not. Unfortunately, most approaches to reducing violence committed against women and girls have been top-down, not bottom-up. For solutions to be contextualized, culturally specific and tailored to each community, the voices of women and girls, victims and survivors, must be included in policy development and implementation. Furthermore, complementary, progressive and safe indicators for measuring the elimination of violence against women and girls must be developed. Developing such indicators will acknowledge that their experiences are nuanced and multifaceted: violence against women includes domestic violence, female genital mutilation, forced and early marriage, trafficking, sexual violence and femicide.

Women as leaders and decision makers

Women are still underrepresented in positions of power and influence at community, national and international levels. The participation of women and girls must be seen as a cross-cutting issue, and the voices of women and girls must be included in policy-setting at every level on all issues, not just those labelled “women’s issues”. Including women as leaders and decision makers empowers them not only as individuals, but as equal partners in a just, equitable and inclusive world. This will be possible only if women are as equally empowered as men in all areas of their lives.

Access to education for women and girls

Gender stereotypes enforced by societies continue to create a world in which women and girls are barred from achieving their fullest potential. Accessing available, high-quality, safe, affordable and lifelong education is crucial to the empowerment of women and girls as individuals and as members of their communities. Literacy, sexual and reproductive health education, vocational skills and other forms of education and training all contribute to equitable employment and are key to improving the lives of women and girls. A lifelong approach to education must remain as a prominent issue in any new development agenda.

These core areas of concern for Soroptimists are still as present today as they were 20 years ago. They must not be present in 15 years’ time. The Beijing Platform for Action and the post-2015 development agenda need to cohere in order for gender inequality in all its forms to be brought to an end.

The global review process provides an opportunity for civil society to remind Member States that when they are negotiating the new development agenda, they are not just talking about language, they are talking about people. Gaps between ratification and implementation need to be closed. International agreement cannot be in words only. It must be enacted.

To this end, proper monitoring and accountability mechanisms must be introduced, and all collected data must be disaggregated by sex. This would ensure that progress and current challenges in achieving gender equality can be properly exposed and better solutions provided.

The year 2015 will see renewed focus on agreeing and achieving a development agenda that puts people at its centre. To do this, the voices of women and girls across the world must be listened to and their needs and opinions incorporated into that development agenda. Therefore, this review is a critical resource for Member States, as it provides a platform for women and girls. It is possible to overcome the structural and social barriers of gender inequality. At this juncture, the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action requires concrete action to make a difference to the lives of women and girls. Soroptimists call, therefore, on member Governments to take action to educate, empower and enable women and girls. We must all continue to look at the world through women’s eyes.