

Every year a delegation of Soroptimists from all four Federations goes to New York for the annual two-week session of the [Commission on the Status of Women](#) (CSW) to work with other like-minded NGOs in an attempt to influence the outcomes of negotiations between the Member States of the UN on the rights of women across the world.



L-R: Pat Black - SI Director of Advocacy, Ann Hodgson - SIGBI President and Margaret Clark - APD for Advocacy

Member States agree on further actions to accelerate progress and promote women's enjoyment of their rights in political, economic and social fields. The outcomes and recommendations of each session are forwarded to the [United Nations Economic & Social Council](#) (ECOSOC) for follow-up.

Soroptimist International is well known and respected at the UN for its work.

You may think this is nothing to do with the grass roots work we do in our projects, but you would be wrong. Every project on our [Database](#) is a source of information to our [United Nations' representatives](#), who can use the information to strengthen arguments and allows us to put the data together to maintain our special consultative status within ECOSOC. This gives us a voice in the negotiations, one that is listened to and respected.

This year's Priority theme was "Women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work".

All four Federations made presentations on the work they have done in this field and the information was gathered from our Database so please get your projects on there to **enable** us to **empower** women and **educate** the United Nations on what we are doing.

Barbara Dixon
Programme Director

What is the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)?

The [Commission on the Status of Women](#) is the principal global intergovernmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. It is a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council ([ECOSOC](#)) and is instrumental in promoting women's rights, documenting and recording the reality of women's lives throughout the world.

This year's Commission saw the attendance of 162 Member States, including 89 representatives at the Ministerial level. Over 3,900 representatives from 580 civil society organizations came to New York from 138 countries, attesting to the growing strength and unity of women's voices around the world.

"Eight people in the world, all men, hold half the wealth of humanity."

Deputy Secretary-General of the UN, Amina J. Mohammed

This year's theme, 'Women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work' highlights the vulnerability of women and girls as the most likely to be left behind economically and in status in the workplace. Women and girls must be ensured of equal access to technology; to land ownership; to finance and micro finance; the opportunity for higher and continued education and hold positions of leadership in both the public and private sectors.

Economic empowerment is a prerequisite to the achievement of Sustainable Development. Women from across the globe, with different cultures and traditions, create a strong sense of unity. As agents of change it is important we do not restrict ourselves with societal views or traditions. Once women are empowered within themselves they have the ability to empower others through transformative politics.



SI President, Yvonne Simpson

Poverty is horizontal as well as vertically and intersectionality is the new 'buzz word'; we are not all poor in the same way. How many of our society are invisible?

- 40% of young people worldwide are working or unemployed and living in poverty
- 1 in 7 young girls are married before the age of 18
- Childbirth is still one of the biggest killers of women, worldwide

The principal output of CSW is the [Agreed Conclusions](#) on priority themes set for each year. These Conclusions contain an analysis of the priority theme and a set of recommendations for governments, intergovernmental bodies and other institutions, civil society and other relevant stakeholders, to be implemented at international, national, regional and local level.

"For the nearly 1 billion women who would enter the global economy in the next decade — empowerment would unleash their potential to chart a new global future. The United Nations would support women every step of the way."

UN Secretary-General António Guterres

It was noted this year that there is a disturbing general 'push back' of women's rights and human rights. The Conclusions also stress the role of men as allies in the realisation of women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work, and acknowledged the important role that Civil Society must play in promoting the economic empowerment of women.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Under-Secretary-General for Gender Equality and Exec. Director of [UN Women](#), said the Commission was a barometer of progress

being made towards a world free of gender inequality. "Inclusive economies and a positive world of work are powerful ways to break repeating cycles of poverty," she said. Yet, with the global pay gap at 23%, women were consistently earning less than men, she urged action to address that "daylight robbery".

And finally, Soroptimist and painter, Villy Makou, from SI Kifisia-Ekali, Athens, has won the competition for the [cover design](#) of this year's NGOs' CSW61 Handbook. Read Villy's thoughts behind the striking design at the link.



Margaret Clark - APD Advocacy

The World's Modern-Day Lepers: Women with Fistulas

The [New York Times](#) reported that one of the worst things that can happen to a woman or girl around the world is a fistula, an internal injury caused by childbirth (or occasionally by rape) that leaves her incontinent, humiliated and sometimes stinking. Victims are the lepers of the 21st century. An estimated two million women in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, the Arab region, and Latin America and the Caribbean are living with this injury, and some 50,000 to 100,000 new cases develop each year. Yet fistula is almost entirely preventable. Its persistence is a sign that health systems are failing to meet women's essential needs.

The condition is invisible as it involves sex, odour and private body parts, and because victims tend to live in impoverished countries. They are poor, rural and female. They are the same group that is routinely denied education, denied the right to own property, denied jobs and denied any recourse after being battered, raped or married against their will. This is why gender equity worldwide (Sustainable Development Goal 5) should be a top item on the social justice agenda.

May 23rd is the [UN International Day to End Obstetric Fistulas](#); the month when we need to think about how we as Soroptimists can address these issues. Fistula Foundations and charities are dedicated to ending the suffering caused by childbirth. Their philosophy is that no woman should have to suffer a life of shame and isolation for trying to bring a child into the world and, as Soroptimists, we have to agree with this.

Many of our clubs have already addressed this problem and their actions are wide-ranging:

- Purchasing a mannequin that enabled trainee nurses in Sierra Leone to understand the problems associated with fistulas.
- Knitting shawls, blankets, hats and jumpers to provide the victims of fistula with warmth.
- Providing funds to the train 10 young women to work in the community in Ethiopia

SI Falkirk reported that for 10 years a woman, living with a fistula, had to travel to work before dawn, when the buses were empty because she smelled of urine. She was unable to drink fluids during the day, as she could not control the flow of urine. When she heard of the possible surgery, she walked for many days to get to the health centre. Following successful surgery at [Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia](#), she has returned home to lead a normal life.



Dr Hamlin and patients at the Hamlin Fistula Hospital in Ethiopia

In America, Hillary Clinton did spotlight global women's issues when she was Secretary of State, and Michelle Obama promoted girls' education globally, but this global gender gap hasn't received the attention it needs since. And, frankly, it doesn't work if it's only women talking about it; men have to be involved as well. What about the UK? Are we confident that the UK is addressing gender equality? Economic Empowerment was the focus in this year's CSW ([Commission on the Status of Women](#)) and I look forward to hearing the reports.

For every woman who receives treatment for a fistula, 50 go without! By supporting the organisations that treat the condition and by lobbying for gender equality we can try to ensure that women and girls are enabled to be healthy, provide for their families and be economically independent.

Rayner Rees - APD Economic Empowerment

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