

Pat Black, Federation President 2012-2013

Inaugural Speech to Federation Conference

Saturday 27 October 2012, Belfast

International President Alice, International President Elect Ann, Federation Presidents Kathy, and Sue Yong, Honorary SIGBI members, Past SIGBI Federation Presidents, distinguished guests, Soroptimists, family and friends.

Looking at you all from here reminds me of a recent quiz evening where we were asked to provide the collective nouns for groups of birds and animals such as a herd of cows, or a school of ravens. We got to wondering what was the collective description for Soroptimists.

Someone came up with the suggestion 'Formidable' and another with Unstoppable – I like the last one.

Sorry I am getting distracted!

It is wonderful to be here in this magnificent building this evening – thank you Maureen, Norma and the Conference Committee for organising this and the whole of a very inspiring and stimulating Conference. We have a great deal to take away with us, much of it challenging and thought provoking, but also happy memories of fun and friendship.

I am sure previous Federation Presidents taking on this role have said this before but I feel both daunted and excited.

I am sure they also have said as I do, that I am very honoured to be standing here and feel so privileged that the members of SIGBI have put their trust in me to continue to take SIGBI forward, and I pledge to do my best to fulfil all of the duties placed on me.

I want to just take some time for much deserved thank yous, then to take a peek into the future on the theme of From Vision to Action, Soroptimists Educating to Lead.

I will do the Oscar bit first and thank a few people.

Immediate Past President Maureen - you have thrown yourself into your year with enthusiasm and determination travelling to the far ends of the world on behalf of SIGBI. 2011-2012 has continued to throw out challenges for this organisation but it has had its rewards, some of the best being your travels to charter the new clubs in two new countries to our Federation, Nepal and Tanzania and the re-emergence of the women of Uganda, while you have encouraged another step forward in partnership with SI Europe towards achieving a new Federation for the whole of Africa.

In your words, it was rocky in places, but your enthusiasm, encouragement, and hard work have helped us through and we tackled some vital areas of governance. We have reflected and learnt lessons so that we will continue to grow and develop a new "Team SIGBI". Thank you so much for your leadership, friendship and support. You have certainly lived up to your theme – Facing the Future Together.

Thank you to the members of the existing Federation Team SIGBI and welcome to the new members. Thank you for being prepared to stand for office as Federation Councillors, Federation Consultants and Advisers, and Federation Management Board members. This organisation could not continue to grow and lead our members forward without your commitment and dedicated service.

Congratulations to our Regional, National Association and Network Presidents whom you have elected to serve you this year. A huge thanks to those who have just completed their term of office.

The reputation and profile internationally of Soroptimism is firmly founded in the many hours of voluntary service and leadership which you all contribute.

Thank you to all those Soroptimists who have supported and continue to support me

The members of SI Penrith and District and Northern Region of England where I was nurtured, encouraged and enthused.

To SI Edinburgh and Scotland South who have warmly embraced me, and probably learnt to live with me in a very short space of time.

I would like to add my personal thanks to Gina, Joanne and Sally who have provided me with support and guidance on every aspect of Soroptimist International and I look forward to working with them over the next year.

And finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for being here in such force to support me tonight but most of all I have to publicly thank a wonderful Soroptimister, my husband.

Our theme for the coming year

From Vision to Action; Soroptimists Educating to Lead **SLIDE 1**

Ties us in to our global organisation and all Soroptimists around the world who are working to make a difference in the lives of women and girls.

I joined Soroptimist International over 20 years ago, and as for so many others it has changed my life. I have made many, many friends, travelled considerably, been part of a huge volunteering force and been rewarded through involvement with Soroptimist Programme Action, assisting and supporting other women and girls in their resolve to move their lives forward.

My career has been firmly based in education in all its aspects. I believe passionately that education is fundamental to making progress for women and girls throughout the world.

I was hooked on Soroptimism when as a club Programme Action officer I became part of a team in Northern England led by the late Dr Moyna Clark. At her instigation we put together a container of educational

materials, hospital equipment, teddies for tragedy, bicycles, school uniforms to go to support SI Freetown in Sierra Leone. SI Northern England had worked to help raise funds to build a classroom for a school and the container would supplement the work being done by SI Freetown. It was direct action, and we had feedback from Carlotta in Freetown on the impact on the community.

A Vision was turned into Action to make a difference in the lives of women and girls in Sierra Leone.

I realised that this was what Soroptimism achieved and knew this was for me. I like to be involved and to believe I can help to bring about change.

Was it a Vision turned into Action that brought you to Soroptimism? Is that what keeps you going as a member? I hope so because there is still plenty for you to be involved in.

Don't believe you can't make a difference, that you are too small. If you can impact on one woman or one girl you will have made the world of difference in that life.

Over the past month the United Nations has been working hard to promote education, especially for girls so that the Millenium Development Goals can be achieved.

SLIDE 2

On 26 September the UN Secretary-General launched a five-year Global Initiative on Education.
- Ban Ki-moon said

“Education gives us a profound understanding that we are tied together as citizens of the global community, and that our challenges are interconnected.”

The United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI) is a partnership of organizations committed to narrowing the gender gap in primary and secondary education. It also seeks to ensure that, by 2015, all children complete primary schooling, with girls and boys having equal access to free, quality education.

Of the 61 million out-of-school children, 32 million are girls and 28 million live in countries scarred by war, conflict and other humanitarian emergencies.

The United Nations Girls Education Initiative's vision is a world where all girls and boys will have equal access to free and quality education.

Soroptimist International’s objective is to increase access to formal and non formal learning opportunities for all.

We are inextricably linked with the United Nation’s Vision and it is up to us to create the Action to achieve those Millenium Development Goals.

October 11th saw the celebration of the first International Day of the Girl Child. This was marked by a campaign to highlight the iniquities of early marriage, particularly forced marriage and the high levels of pregnancy for girl child brides, along with the dangers this brings for those young mothers.

“Girls with a secondary education are up to six times less likely to marry young compared to girls with little or no education”.

Rebecca, a young Maasai.

"I want to continue with my education, finish school and then university so I can be a teacher or the representative of a big office in the country. I would like to help children since I also needed help as a child."

What an ambition! What a dream!

Girls lacking educational opportunities may be right there in your community, they don't have to be in a country far distanced from your own - most Soroptimists here are from the UK so let's have a glimpse of what is happening there.

The charity Barnados has recently issued a report in the UK entitled 'Not the End of the Story'. This has been written because from 2015 all young people in England between 16 and 18 years old will be required to take part in some form of education and training.

This will include the 20,000 girls, aged 15 to 17, who become young mothers each year in **England**, many of whom face considerable barriers to participation in education in any form.

That is an enormous number of young women who need a great deal of support and do not necessarily have families around to help.

How much do you know about what is happening in your local area?

Do you know how many girls between 15 and 17 years of age are pregnant in your community? Do you know what support they have?

Is there something you can do locally? What Action can you take?

You have heard during this Conference the difference Soroptimists are making to the lives of young mothers in Papua New Guinea and The Gambia. Immediate Past President Maureen and I have been delighted to visit many projects in Africa, India, and around this Federation where Soroptimists are supporting women and girls with their education and training, providing them with opportunity and economic prospects for the future.

You have heard the difference you have made to the recipients who have had awards from the Diamond Education Fund. We must continue to raise the funds so that these women can benefit from further educational opportunities.

I can't resist asking here if you complete a Programme Focus Report form to record everything you do to Educate, Empower, Enable.

Soroptimists continually demonstrate that they are able to turn our Vision into Action. But Let us aim to **multiply** that this year. On the programme

Focus Report Forms for the last year we have recorded our support for 100,000 women and girls. Let's make that 1 MILLION next year.

I have a two part challenge, a plan to achieve this.

I challenge every member to first of all educate themselves in any way which will make a difference in their own lives.

It may be raising your own awareness of issues we are involved in, it may be working towards improving your health, it may be learning something new for fun – how about setting up your own or a club Facebook page so I can see every a day what you are doing?

Secondly I challenge every member to provide another women or group of women with an opportunity to gain access to education which will make a positive difference in their lives. If each of you can do this for 10, or better still 100 women and girls we will achieve our target.

By October 2013 I would like Susan and the Assistant Programme Directors to be able to look at the PFR forms and total up the number of women and girls whose lives have been changed in some way through any form of education and be able to tell me Yes, it is 1 million. What a difference you will have made in the world!

Having listened to our Federation Programme Director and the Programme Team you are well versed by now in the model of Educate, Empower, and Enable through Advocacy Awareness and Action.

The recently published SI Global Impact Report 2011 presents the work which Soroptimists around the world are doing.

To quote from that Report

“We educate women and girls by increasing their access to the skills necessary to take on whatever challenge they desire – from basic literacy and numeracy skills or vocational training or health or sanitation or climate change or preparation for running in elections and everything in between; improving physical environments, such as gender appropriate sanitation facilities or building dormitories, also increases access to skills and thus also falls within this framework. In doing so, SI empowers women with confidence and choice, giving them the tools necessary to achieve their fullest potential”.

That sums it up in a nutshell.

I was privileged to be in New York this year at the Commission on the Status of Women in the second week attending the Commission on the

Status of Women as part of a very small NGO team working with the UK and EU delegations to agree with other country delegations the text of the statement which would be issued at the end of the meeting. Many of you will know that no agreement could be reached.

I was horrified and concerned to find that this was because not all Governments are willing to continue to uphold the rights of women and in fact were lobbying to move us backwards. Mobinar Jaffar this morning gave us a glimpse of how this is happening in countries involved in the Arab Spring.

Next year the main theme of the Commission on the Status of Women is Violence against Women. **SLIDE 3**

Discussions have already started by Governments and the UN on the basis of the statement which could be agreed for next year. The UK PAC represented by Jan Hamlin, Chair of UKPAC and myself have already been working with other NGOs and the UK Government to prepare for this meeting.

But it is not just the UK Government and the EU we should be talking to.

It is important that every country representative in this Federation and throughout SI make representations to their Governments.

You have access to local and national politicians and country representatives. Make sure they know what the issues are for the Commission on the Status of Women next March and ask them how they will ensure that your human rights and those of all women and girls are upheld. Ask them why they were not prepared to support the statement this year, and whether they will support the statement condemning all forms of violence against women, and if not why not. Remember you are the irritant in the pearl!

Achieving human rights for women and girls, including universal education for girls is not as comfortable or as easy as it might seem from where we are sitting tonight. We have heard of many successes during the course of this Conference but what if the going gets tough? Where do you stand then? What part will you play? How will you turn that Vision into Action?

You have all heard during this conference of Malala and her friends. We have supported an emergency resolution.

SLIDE 4

Their story was highlighted ironically just the day before the International Day of the Girl Child.

This happened in one of the countries of our Federation, Pakistan.

Just to remind you

A fourteen year old girl, Malala, has been campaigning for the right of girls to receive education and especially for her personal right to go to school. A Taliban edict in North West Pakistan sought to ban girl's education and schools were being closed.

Extracts from her diary expressing her views appeared on BBC Urdu online. She gave interviews to many newspapers and appeared on Pakistan TV. She was presented by her Government with a National Youth Peace Award.

While Malala's diary revealed the daily struggles associated with trying to pursue an education in a place where girls aren't a priority, it also demonstrated Malala's courage and determination for a better future for herself. Despite the dangers of being a girl in the Swat Valley, Malala continued to fight for her right to an education.

Two weeks ago Malala was shot in the head on her way home from school in Mingora, the region's main city. The Taliban admitted they were responsible for the shooting of Malala and two other young women who were with her on the school bus.

SLIDE 5

Malala had written “I don’t mind sitting on the ground as long as I can go to school”.

“I know the importance of education because my pens and my books were taken from me by force”.

Talat Pashad said yesterday

“The only thing the Taliban are afraid of is girls with books”

Some very courageous Soroptimists from this Federation demonstrated in Karachi on your behalf against what had happened to Malala. **SLIDE 6**

I am sure you will all join with me in wishing Malala and her colleagues a safe recovery and thanking her and those Pakistani Soroptimists for standing strong for the girls of the world.

This is just one young woman’s story which highlights how far we still have to go in fighting for the basic rights of women and girls. – how many millions of stories more are there? Don’t forget to look on the SIGBI website after Conference to find out what Actions you can take to join that fight.

As Soroptimists we must stand alongside women and girls who need our voice to ensure that they are protected by their Governments, not violated by authorities working in the name of the Government or by one of many extremist groups.

As Gandhi said

SLIDE 7

“You may never know what results come of your actions, but if you do nothing there will be no results”.

You and I can and must turn our Vision into Action.

SLIDE 8

Those young women and girls are relying on you - you can turn their dreams, their future into our Vision of

a world where women and girls together achieve their individual and collective potential, realise aspirations and have an equal voice in creating strong, peaceful communities worldwide

SLIDE 9

SIGBI Conference next year will be focussed on your Programme Action and how you have created reality from the vision.

It will be held at the Sage, Gateshead, just across the River Tyne from Newcastle.

The Conference Committee have been working hard, and Federation Programme Director Sue and her team are putting together excellent sessions based on your activities so make sure we hear about them.

You have heard from Patricia Gatherum, Conference Vice Chairman, that there will be a major event - The Red Square but it needs you to make it an even bigger success than the Pink Bridge.

The North of England has wonderful scenery and people who will offer a warm welcome. Encourage those members who have never been to Conference before to come and enjoy the renowned Northern Hospitality.

So for next year - come to Newcastle Gateshead and BE PART OF IT.

Thank you for the privilege to serve as your Federation President, I will do my best. I am so looking forward to meeting and spending time with as many of you as I can during the next twelve months.

Thank you all.