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To all participants in the Soroptimist International GB and Ireland 86th Federation Conference, Belfast, October 2020

We are delighted to welcome you all to Belfast for this wonderful event. Circumstances of course dictate that on this occasion, it has to be a virtual welcome to a virtual event, but we hope and wish that in the fullness of time, we will be able to welcome you in person to enjoy everything our great city of Belfast has to offer.

Of course, one of Belfast's great strengths at the moment is its tech sector, a great building block for our economic future. And as with many other events and occasions these days, it is due to the wonders of technology that we are able to continue with this conference online, so that the energy, the creativity, the positivity and the enthusiasm of the Soroptimist movement can be allowed to shine and keep us all moving forward.

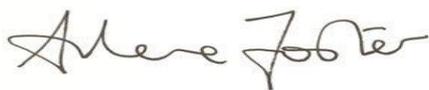
We are delighted that your President, Isobel Smith, has chosen the conference theme as 'We Stand Up for Women', and we know that your conference timetable and structure will enable great exploration and facilitation of this theme. The work of the Soroptimist movement is invaluable both at home and abroad. Since its inception in 1921, it has grown into a global force for the promotion and nurturing of women's and girls' rights and opportunities, ensuring their voices are strong, resolute, informed, confident and most importantly of all, listened to. The Soroptimist organisation ensures that women across the world and across all parts of society can achieve their potential in whatever setting they live their lives. From grassroots projects in some of the world's poorest and most under-developed regions, to the highest echelons of the United Nations, the Soroptimist organisation gives women a voice and a means of bringing change and progress and growth to their own communities and across the world stage.

In our own locale, the Executive is committed to delivering a fair and compassionate society; a society that reflects the best international standards of human rights. Women and men can be affected in different ways by Government policies and actions. While as a society we have made considerable progress, many aspects of gender inequality are deeply engrained and complex such as the gender pay gap, domestic violence, participation of women in public life, and gender stereotyping.

In line with the New Decade, New Approach Agreement, the Minister for Communities is, on behalf of the Executive, leading on the development of a new Gender Equality Strategy. The Minister has recently published a timescale for delivery that will embed the principles of co-design and co-production into the Strategy's development and implementation. This approach, involving citizens, stakeholders and other Departments will deliver a Strategy that can effectively identify and remove the barriers to gender equality.

There will be opportunities for those of you who live here to contribute to the development of the new Gender Equality Strategy. There will also be opportunities for those of you from other countries to share your ideas and practice with us. We would encourage you all to participate.

In the meantime, we wish you an inspirational, productive and enjoyable 86th Conference in Belfast.



**THE RT HON ARLENE FOSTER MLA
FIRST MINISTER**



**MICHELLE O'NEILL MLA
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**