

MIDLAND ARDEN REGIONAL MEETING – 4 DECEMBER 2021

Good morning, Regional President Anne, guests, and fellow Soroptimists, thank you for inviting me to join your Regional meeting during the '16 days' campaign to 'Orange the World'

I had asked President Anne if there was anything that she would like me to address today; having consulted with the Regional Exec, raising SIGBI's profile, together with recruitment and retention of members appear to be the overriding concern.

SIGBI's previous Strategic Plan ended in 2021, so one of the first tasks of the 2020 Board was to develop a new plan. It was agreed that, given the challenges facing the Federation with its declining membership, the 2021 plan would run for four years, until 2025.

The Primary Statement for the Plan is – 'In four years' time we wish to have an increased, active membership which delivers credible projects to improve the lives of women and girls'

The Plan's Strategic Goals for 2021 – 2025 are:

1. Ensure SIGBI's work supports SIGBI Limited's charitable purposes.
2. Increase membership and reduce age profile.
3. Increase public profile.
4. Ensure systems, governance, structures, and finances are fit for purpose.

SIGBI Ltd's charitable purposes are quite broad, promoting the advancement of human rights, the advancement of education, health and saving lives, good citizenship and community development, equality, and diversity; the relief and/or prevention of poverty.

This means SIGBI's projects can cover a wide range of activity, within those charitable purposes. However, when I have met with Soroptimists over the last year, there has been considerable discussion about whether SIGBI's programme work is too diverse. Not

enough focus is given to a particular area, with the result that Soroptimists are not known for any specific action.

At the programme webinar Programme Director Kay Richmond held earlier in the year, there was a suggestion that only projects that were directly within the UN 5Ps and related SDGs should be recorded on the database, a new concept.

Kay will be holding another webinar in January 2022 for members to discuss the merits of having a Federation wide project, something I know many members feel strongly about.

In order to increase membership, the Board and the organisation needs to be creative in terms of reducing the age profile. It will be of no surprise that statistics confirm without doubt, that SIGBI's profile is one of an ageing membership.

There is the perception that this is the cause of SIGBI's declining membership. However, the exit surveys available from members that have left do not bear this out. They indicate that the expectations of newer members are not being met. We need to understand why this is and what can be done to rectify the situation. Regrettably, bad behaviour still appears to play a large part.

There has been discussion for some time that the organisation 'does not do what it says on the tin' but I wonder if it is more that we are doing what we have always done and are not making ourselves attractive to younger women?

We must make the organisation relevant in today's digital world and I know first-hand how committed President Anne you are to that ideal. The creation of a virtual membership model is a big step in the right direction and there are currently three virtual clubs near to chartering.

One of the few positives of the recent pandemic has been the necessary increased use of technology. Through holding online meetings, clubs have been able to attract a superb range of speakers

that fellow Soroptimists and prospective members have been able to attend.

Members were able to recruit 363 new members throughout the last year, an extraordinary feat, given all the restrictions.

I recently attended the chartering of the two e-clubs set up in Milan, where every member is aged between 24 and 35; I also learned that the 'e' stands for 'empower' not electronic as many of us thought! The members all originate from Milan, but many are currently developing their careers all around the world, they have nevertheless begun their project work.

I know the intergenerational model works for some clubs, but it may be that SIGBI needs to create a type of membership that has an upper age limit of 35.

It is my belief that the Board must be radical in its thinking; ensuring that it is as simple as possible for groups of women to get together in whatever way best suits them.

For the Board to be able to assist clubs with recruitment, it needs to know where the gaps are in the resources provided. In terms of increasing membership, there are currently 8 Guides to aid recruitment and retention of members under the membership section of the website. I would be interested to know how many clubs use them and if they do, how successful are they? If you do not use them, why not? Do members find themselves creating their own and if so, are the correct branding guidelines being used? It is vital that SIGBI delivers one message in its branding.

I am often asked for a succinct way to explain what we as Soroptimists do; put simply 'We Stand up for Women and Girls in our Communities.'

The PR, Marketing & Comms team have produced a series of Toolkits throughout the year to be used for significant events in the Soroptimist calendar; how many members and clubs have used them?

How easy were they to use and how successful were they; if members are not using them, why not?

Are members aware of or have read SIGBI's Annual Report, which is an excellent tool to illustrate our programme work, when talking to prospective members?

Communications is one of the most difficult areas to get right, answers to these sorts of questions would really help to identify how this key area could be improved.

How much emphasise do members place on SIGBI's Consultative Status at the United Nations?

Recent research has identified that the international aspect of being a Soroptimist is attractive to younger women, together with the issues of gender equality and the environment.

You will recall that some time ago, SIGBI began work on forming school and campus clubs, without a lot of success. At this year's conference, Regions were asked to support clubs in sponsoring young women to attend the conference.

Altogether 10 young women were sponsored, and I was delighted to hold a meeting with 8 of them at conference on the Saturday. It was inspiring to listen to their thoughts on what young women want, all of them spoke about the importance of education and the empowerment of women. They were all connected to Soroptimists in some way, some by means of a sixth form club and spoke of how they wished to continue when they went to university next year, perhaps by means of a lunchtime debating forum.

I enquired as to how they felt about including young men into the group; the majority felt it was necessary, although one thought it

provided a safer place for open discussion if it was women only. Perhaps the time has come to review the parameters for setting up campus clubs.

I would like to come back to the Primary Statement mentioned earlier - 'In four years' time we wish to have an increased, active membership which delivers credible projects to improve the lives of women and girls.

As you know the minimum number of members required to form a club has already been reduced from 12 to 8. However, clubs tend to focus on achieving a membership in the region 25 to 35 members, some even larger; could more be achieved if there were smaller pockets of able Soroptimists, rather than a larger number where, in reality, very few are active?

It is vital that we raise our public profile by increasing community engagement, developing a plan to liaise more with likeminded groups. SIGBI is now a relatively small organisation so forming partnerships is key to its public visibility.

It is the Board's responsibility to raise awareness externally and thus aid recruitment.

The 6 leading Women's organisations in the country, combine to form the 6-0 group, of which SIGBI is a member. The others are Business & Professional Women Graduates (BFWG), Business & Professional Women (BPW UK), the National Council of Women (NCW GB), the Women's Institute (NFWI), and the Townswomen's Guild (TG).

SIGBI, together with the rest of the 6-0 group, needs to be taking the lead amongst other national and international women's groups and organisations, bringing them together and promoting collaboration at all levels.

I know that all ten clubs in the Midland Arden Region entered wholeheartedly into celebrating S. I's centenary year, thereby raising SIGBI's profile. You have been extremely busy with your amazing tree planting, supporting many Women's Refuges; the Woman of Empowerment Trail (a fabulous idea!); a virtual concert; not to mention the cream tea which raised £800 for Women's Aid; as well as £900 raised for Tarango, a charity that supports women in Bangladesh, and of course the hugely successful Kori Project. Many of you obviously enjoy gardening and raise your profile in your community by planting and maintaining flower beds and gardens. Well done!

My congratulations and thanks for all your efforts in supporting your chosen projects and raising awareness of the work of SIGBI.

There probably isn't enough time right now but I would love to hear your thoughts on the points raised today, please do get in touch.

Thank you,

Cathy