

# THE ROAD TO EQUALITY

*The Sustainable  
Development Goals,  
Women & Girls*



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# SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL

## Introduction

### About This Report

As the world takes stock of contributions to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, and how far we have to go, this report showcases Soroptimist International's approach. The projects in this report demonstrate the innovations that SI members bring to their own communities, supporting countries on their pathways to sustainable development. Forced, early and child marriage, human trafficking, female genital mutilation and cutting, educations and training, the human rights of older women and domestic violence are all core areas of SI project work. These areas of project work address some of the most marginalised women and girls in societies. This report presents SI members' projects on these key areas with the aim of building capacities within communities.

In this review year, it is impossible to ignore the public health crisis that the faces countries, communities, families and individuals. This report also highlights how civil society organisations, such as SI, are able to mobilise and respond quickly and efficiently in emergency situations. COVID-19 has made it clear that for crisis response to be effective, it requires consolidated action on the ground — frequently government action will not achieve its purpose without community support. Emergency response undoubtedly impacts the course of sustainable development, the information and SI best practice contained within this report seeks to empower women to make the changes they want in their communities in support of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of gender equality.

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### About Soroptimist International

Soroptimist International (SI) is a global women's organisation that actively contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals through empowering local communities to create their own transformative change. By supporting communities to identify their needs and promote their unique innovations that address the sustainable development challenges facing them, SI projects build local capacity, infrastructure and skills. Active in over 3,000 communities across 121 countries worldwide,

SI contributes to the achievement of gender equality through its aim to 'Educate, Empower and Enable' women and girls. The information in this report is based upon the tried and tested experience and knowledge of Soroptimist International grassroots projects which respond to the needs of marginalised women and girls. The projects that Soroptimists undertake demonstrate that together civil society and NGOs can achieve transformational breakthroughs to achieve a sustainably developed world.



## 70 Years of Supporting UN Work

Soroptimist International's history is intertwined with the work of the UN, long supporting humanitarian and social development aims. After World War II, Soroptimists demonstrated their commitment to those aims by responding to the impacts of war. In recognition of SI's commitment and community-based expertise, SI has held forms of consultative status with the UN since the 1950s and has maintained its General Consultative Status granted in 1984. This has allowed SI to have UN Representatives, who have been present and active during major UN milestones including the agreements of the Beijing Declaration, the Millennium Development Goals, the Paris Climate Agreement, and the Migration Compact.

Today, SI Representatives and volunteers not only respond to UN initiatives, but they input into those processes too. Active in New York, Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi, Paris, Rome and Bangkok, SI's Representatives and other SI members participate in UN conferences, functional commissions, regional forums and working groups as well as human rights processes including UPR and CEDAW. Through the Major Groups and Other Stakeholders, SI joined other NGOs and civil society organisations in participating in the unprecedented global consultative processes

that led to the creation of the 2030 Agenda. Throughout that process SI joined the call for there to be a standalone goal on gender equality, that was crosscutting for all other goals. Having achieved this aim SI continues to advocate for sustainable development actions that use gender mainstreaming to realise this ambition.

SI's UN Representatives are instrumental in translating and expressing SI's grassroots knowledge into advocacy positions and representing the views and needs of women and girls for high-level conferences. These conferences, like the HLPF, can seem very far away from communities not experiencing the benefits of sustainable development. Accordingly, SI UN Representatives use their knowledge of SI projects in international discussions on policy decisions, highlighting that all UN activities have to mainstream gender. At the core of this knowledge and experience is an awareness that it is vital not to silo the role of women and girls in sustainable development, nor consider them merely as recipients of development efforts. Instead, women and girls must be considered agents of change, for themselves and their communities.

*"With only 10 years to go till the 2030 deadline for the SDGs, now is not the time for states to pat themselves on the back. We all need to focus on what hasn't gone right and find ways to do it better. Only by being honest about the challenges we're facing and collaborating with each other will we make sure we meet that 2030 deadline."*

*— Sharon Fisher, SI President*

## Civil Society Organisations and Achieving the SDGs

Civil society organisations, such as SI, are in a prime position to observe and respond to gaps in efforts to achieve the SDGs. CSOs implement multidimensional projects that recognise the interconnected nature of the SDGs every day. For many, this 'innovative approach' is not new; it is important to recognise the expertise of NGOs and CSOs as agents for sustainable development. NGOs and CSOs are often uniquely placed to support vulnerable groups and can access information and perspectives that it is harder for governments and other services to access. By integrating the perspectives of vulnerable groups into sustainable development programmes, NGOs

and CSOs enhance programmes' legitimacy and accountability. State authorities and services at all levels should therefore respond to information and citizen generated data (both quantitative and qualitative) collected by NGOs and civil society, and use that information to guide policy development and implementation. This report is one such example of the unique, grassroots perspectives that NGOs and CSOs bring in the spirit of a global partnership for development. Just as the 2030 Agenda was developed through a consultative process, so should its implementation be carried out in consultation with all stakeholders. Only then will no one be left behind

### The Role of the High-Level Political Forum

The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) provides a critical opportunity to review progress to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is vital that all of those involved in the HLPF, states, international organisations, the private sector and NGOs and CSOs, reflect on their activities with a critical lens. This reflection is essential to make sustainable development actions and policies are effective. Through working with communities, civil society organisations play a key role in identifying gaps in implementation – it is important to continuously ask, 'who is not being included in development efforts' and 'who is not fully benefiting from development efforts'? Too often, it is women and girls who are being left behind. It is especially important to ask these questions this year, as the aim of reviewing all SDGs together five years after their agreement is to identify ways to accelerate action. Soroptimist International's experience with building capacities at the grassroots level means that as a global organisation SI is able to support the HLPF process by providing key information about what works in achieving the SDGs.

## THE ROAD TO EQUALITY:

### Policy and Implementation Fundamentals

As the SDGs are interconnected and indivisible, it is impossible to address one goal without addressing them all. Gender equality cuts across all of the SDGs as fundamental to sustainable development — getting actions to achieve gender equality right has become all-important. Gender mainstreaming through laws, policies, programmes, financing and indicators need to be urgently implemented as no country has achieved gender equality.

Gender equality is a human right and a precondition for the achievement of sustainable development. All states have recognized that women are agents of development and that achieving sustainable development is impossible if half of humanity is denied their human rights and equal opportunities. Empowering women and girls drives economic prosperity for all, improves health outcomes, and creates more peaceful and stable societies. Therefore, efforts to achieve gender equality must be considered as a means of implementation and a critical policy measure for countries who want to achieve their full development potential.

Efforts to achieve the SDGs must take a human rights-based approach. Although all states have human rights obligations which include women and girls under international law, ensuring compliance with these obligations while implementing the SDGs largely remains a commitment on paper, not a reality. Progress across regions and within states has been inconsistent; multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination as well as exploitation, marginalization, oppression and subordination of women and girls still persists. Without efforts to improve the status of women and girls fully adopting a human rights-based approach, women and girls will remain chronically disadvantaged and discriminated against,

exacerbating development limitations and preventing the realisation of universal human rights.

Integrated gender-sensitive development strategies, including legislation, policies, financing, implementation processes and monitoring, are fundamental to achieving the long-wished-for ambitions of the SDGs. Through gender mainstreaming, gender-specific interventions can and should be designed in accordance to the needs of societies to overcome historical, cultural and systematic discrimination and enable all women and men to benefit equally from sustainable development efforts.

Getting gender equality right does not mean simply giving more work to women, be it new sources of employment, positions of leadership, policy involvement and other sustainable development roles. This flawed approach assumes women's time and efforts are inexhaustible and fails to account for women's unpaid labour and caring responsibilities. Instead, gender equality efforts require redistributing traditionally female roles. Without ensuring women are fully supported in other areas of work, including in the home by men, social gender disparities will continue to be entrenched.

## Gender Inequality Today

The world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030. The problem of widespread gender-based discrimination and its impacts have now been further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, setting gender equality ever further back.

Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic, UNDP's Gender Inequality Index revealed that overall progress in gender inequality had been slowing in recent years.<sup>i</sup> The World Economic Forum projects that it will take 100 years to achieve gender parity and 257 years to eliminate gender inequalities in economic opportunity.<sup>ii</sup> Repeated studies demonstrate both men and women show bias against gender equality in areas such as politics, economics, education, intimate partner violence and women's reproductive rights. Among those interviewed across 75 countries, 50% of men and women through men made better political leaders, 40% considered men to make better business executives, and almost 30% agreed that it is justifiable for a man to beat his partner.<sup>iii</sup> Gender leadership and wage-gaps persist worldwide in all sectors and that gap widens with increasing seniority, including the private sector and in policy and politics. Violence against women and girls persists at horrific rates in both public and private spheres. As well as intimate partner violence and sexual violence, women and girls are subjected to psychological aggression, physical forms of discipline, child abuse, workplace and street harassment, early and forced marriage, femicide, and female genital mutilation. This lack of control over their own bodies has other impacts — nearly half of women in relationships do not make their own choices about reproductive health and rights.<sup>iv</sup> Women and girls remain 14 times more likely to die during disasters and suffer economic loss

afterwards. And, women are less likely to benefit from their human rights, inherit property or own and manage natural and economic resources. The women's human rights defenders and civil society organisations who work to address this are often threatened. Furthermore, all of these challenges to gender equality are worsening during the COVID-19 pandemic. All of these realities mean that women and girls are going to be left behind in sustainable development if action is not urgently increased and expedited.

These findings are not surprising to any organisation that works with women and girls in the pursuit of gender equality. The projects SI clubs create respond directly to the continuing need to respond to all these forms of gender inequality, as highlighted by the projects in this report. The findings found in studies are only statistical representations of the realities lived by women. To fully address those experiences, it is important to understand the role that systems and policies have in their creation, continuation and exacerbation. Increasing levels of violence and discrimination against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic are undoubtedly related to pre-existing problems and policies. As outlined later in this report, responses to COVID-19 must integrate a gender perspective and the SDGs. There is a clear need to do more and be more effective to eradicate gender inequality by 2030.

## Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming involves integrating a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes, and, regulatory measures and spending programmes. However, using gender mainstreaming as a policy approach does not replace the need for targeted, women-specific policies and programmes that rectify inequality and discrimination. Nor is gender mainstreaming about adding a 'woman's component' into existing policies. Instead, it recognises all issues as women's issues and ensures. Therefore, women's and girls' needs should be included and assessed equally in policies and actions. Consequently, gender mainstreaming is an integral dimension for the effective design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of sustainable development policies and programmes.

### Gender mainstreaming efforts must include:

- Effective accountability mechanisms for monitoring progress that seek out and include the perspectives and experiences of women and girls.
- Rigorous gender analyses, that includes recommendations and requires gender budgeting to be carried out during the creation, implementation, assessment and evaluation levels of policies.
- Clear political will and allocation of adequate resources for mainstreaming, including additional financial and human resources, to put gender mainstreaming into practice and so gender analyses have an impact.
- Broadening women's equal participation and input at all levels of decision-making.
- Gender budgeting, gender-differentiated statistics and indicators as critical components of gender mainstreaming, and to be used for all policies and actions.



## Financing for Development

Chronic underinvestment in gender equality persists globally, exacerbating development limitations and placing women and girls at a discriminatory and higher risk of being left behind. This underinvestment has been aggravated by austerity measures adopted in many countries and will be exacerbated during any post-COVID-19 recovery. The disproportionate impacts upon women and girls means it is imperative that future recovery efforts use human rights-based approaches and gender-mainstreaming throughout financing for sustainable development.

More information is needed about the amount of resources dedicated towards gender equality and services for women and girls, including as a percentage of overall spending. Dedicated resources are needed to address structural inequalities. Women's services are frequently underfunded and the first to be cut: instead, funds for these services should be specified and protected. Under-resourced women's and feminist organisations frequently intervene in

### Gender Budgeting

Gender budgeting accounts for how budgetary processes, fiscal policies, revenues, expenditures and administrative procedures all impact, and are impacted by, gender inequality. Often budgetary processes are considered to be gender neutral. However, this leads to gender blind budgets, resulting suboptimal decision-making, disadvantaging women and girls and slowing sustainable development progress. Gender budgeting is a critical strategy to achieve gender equality by focusing on how public resources are collected and spent. It is grounded in a gender analysis, and requires

lieu of government services and social protection floors and should be supported as partners in sustainable development.

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*It is clear that investing in girls and women needs to be seen as equally important as investing in men and boys.*

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Financing for development must directly tackle circumstances contributing to unequal outcomes; systematic and practical support from budgetary processes which buttress sustainable development is required. In times of economic downturn, states must ensure that policy responses take into account the differential priorities and needs of women, men, girls and boys and do not undermine the policies and plans that promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Therefore, Financing for Development processes must include gender budgeting as a core component of gender mainstreaming.

budgets to be restructured incorporating a gender perspective at all levels of the budgetary process, including fiscal policies, revenues, expenditures and administrative procedures. This kind of analysis allows for the inclusion of key issues that are otherwise overlooked, such as the unpaid labour of women in the household and its economic effect on women, and the distribution of economic resources within families. As gender equality is a core sustainable development aim and principle, gender budgeting simply becomes good budgeting.

## National Action Plans

National Action Plans should ensure collaborative efforts across different policy areas to ensure gender-sensitive development. For example, in seeking to address the inclusion and full participation of women girls in all levels of education, it will be necessary to also address whether there is accessible and safe water and sanitation facilities, safe transport routes, access to food at educational institutions, and to support the translation of educational achievements into equal employment opportunities. Typically, these issues will be responded to by a number of government agencies, NGOs, or the private sector. They should all be included in the development and implementation of National Action Plans. Women and girls must also be equal participants in governance, reform, environmental protection and sustainable development activities is integral to the 2030 Agenda as they will act as enablers and accelerators for achieving all the SDGs including the environment-related ones.

Soroptimist International supports the development and implementation of National Action Plans, and Regional Action Plans that:

- Integrate a gender-perspective into all areas of policy making and have women being involved at all levels of decision-making and implementation, including in positions of leadership.
- Implement gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting, and require that these approaches be used by all development actors in the pursuit of sustainable development and gender equality, including the private sector.
- Ensure different policy areas are integrated and enacted holistically so that sustainable development can be implemented most effectively and efficiently.
- Require there to be high quality qualitative and quantitative data collection, disaggregated by age, sex, geography, income, disability, race and ethnicity and other factors relevant to monitoring inequalities as a minimum.
- Properly finance programmes and interventions that address gender inequality.
- Prioritise and adequately resource policies, programmes, and interventions that address the social, economic, legal and political discrimination that women and girls face.
- Address gender inequality and discrimination through a rights-based approach, and initiate immediate efforts for legal reforms that ensure women and girls have equal rights to men and boys, and are able to have equal access to justice, education, healthcare, social protection services, economic and natural resources, and humanitarian assistance.
- Strengthen legal frameworks and systems of justice to be responsive to the unique needs, experiences and perspectives of women and girls, and, where necessary, enact and enforce new laws to prevent, prosecute and punish all cases of discrimination and violence committed against women and girls
- Facilitate and ensure all states work towards ratifying international human rights instruments, in particular CEDAW and its Optional Protocols, without reservations.

## Women as Drivers of Sustainable Development

Women of all ages and girls need to be agents, and not only recipients of sustainable development. Women know first-hand the barriers to gender equality and are best placed to address them through sustainable development, with the support of institutions, policies, and the allyship of men and boys. The projects highlighted in this report all emphasise how women can be empowered to be agents for change.

Institutional, social and political reform is necessary to remove barriers to women as drivers of sustainable development. More political will is needed to implement these changes. International norms and standards on women's and girls' human rights and gender equality provide a solid basis for advancing action to strengthen the vital role of women in achieving sustainable development, and create equal societies. However, this progress is hampered by low levels of participation and leadership of women in decision-making at all levels. While women will often go to extraordinary lengths to support their families, communities and countries, the barriers they face while doing so are disproportionate and discriminatory, preventing women from maximising their positive impacts on

sustainable development. Women's and feminist organisations already have in-depth knowledge of these barriers and ways to overcome them and must be considered partners for development.

Women's knowledge, agency and collective action are central to finding, developing and implementing more equal pathways to sustainable development that take into account the gender-differentiated impacts of policies and programmes. For example, rarely do women-led projects on access to education fail to account for childcare, flexible working, healthcare provision, safe transport, addressing workplace sexual discrimination, or for including women in leadership and decision-making.



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*"Advocacy has far reaching positive impacts and is crucial for driving the change we need to achieve the 2030 Agenda. By speaking up, advocates have the power to facilitate change and influence policy for a more fair and equal world."*

*— Bev Bucur, SI Director of Advocacy*

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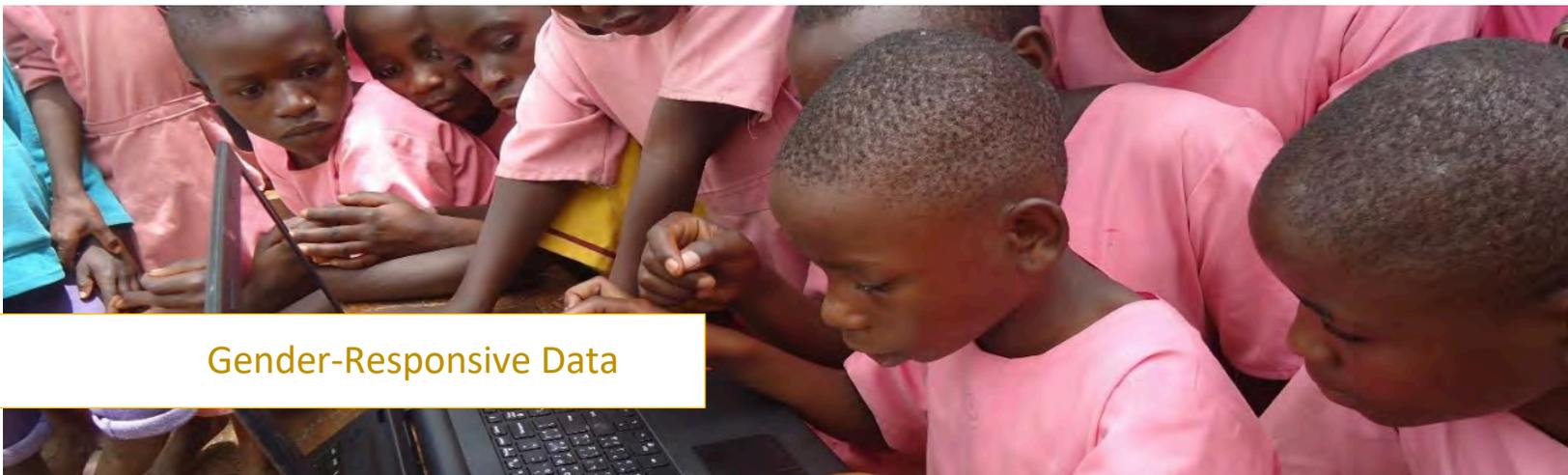
## Empowering Women in their Communities

The ambitions of the SDGs require that women and girls must be equally participate in decision make and implementation, and not simply be the object or recipient of sustainable development. The whole of society approach needed to achieve the SDGs should support women and girls in their abilities to campaign, start projects and change minds in their communities. Girls and women of all ages already lead on issues that they define as important and repeatedly demonstrate the knowledge, skills, willingness and capability to create sustainable change in their communities. The community-level actions they take ensure enduring sustainable change that cannot be imposed by top-down actions, especially on

issues which are culturally or historically created such as FGM, all forms of violence against women and girls, food insecurity, healthcare, WASH, access to education, sharing unpaid labour and caring duties, and other forms of discrimination. To empower women and girls in their communities, their efforts must be properly supported and resourced. This support should include empowering women to exercise their rights, as well as having equal access to and control of resources, and their equal participation in decision making in all spheres of life. These all impact upon whether women's actions and work are able to fully translate into sustainable change.

### Soroptimist International Empowering Women

Women have long been advocating for the policy changes they need to address gender inequality in all its dimensions. Soroptimists, as a global network of women advocates have continued to take action and support other women through lobbying, project work and providing training support. Frequently, SI clubs create global-north global-south connections, ensuring capacity building and the sharing of resources and knowledge of what works. This includes by providing training and support to ensure that those women who are empowered through SI projects are able to advocate for themselves as they are the experts of their own experiences and their needs. They know what sustainable development interventions will work, and what added cross-issue policies and action will be needed to ensure success.



## Gender-Responsive Data

With only a decade left to go before the 2030 deadline of achieving the SDGs, now is the time to focus on getting the data right. It is necessary to review and improve upon the indicators, including by developing qualitative data.

### The Need for Qualitative Data

Qualitative data seeks to describe phenomena, experiences and perspectives that can be observed but not measured. This type of data therefore assumes that people's realities are dynamic and dependent upon a multitude of factors that numbers alone are not able to capture. The aim of qualitative research and data is to understand the social reality of individuals and groups by establishing 'how' or 'why' particular social phenomenon, behaviours and experiences exist. As gender inequality is a socially created and experienced phenomenon and women's vulnerabilities are not intrinsic, qualitative data is essential in understanding what programmes to eradicate gender inequality should be and how policy areas intersect. In contrast, quantitative data focuses on measuring phenomena numerically, which assumes that there is a fixed and measurable reality. These statistics require qualitative data for interpretation to ensure that policies and programmes are effective and responsive

### Gender-Differentiated Statistics

Gender-differentiated statistics provide a numerical representation of the situational differences and inequalities between women and men in all areas of life, whilst gender-differentiated indicators serve as a means to measure reductions in gender inequality. Gender-differentiated statistics and indicators should be collected nationally, regionally and globally in order to measure gender gaps and consequently adjust sustainable development programmes to rectify inequalities. All data should be disaggregated on the basis of age, sex, geography, income, disability, race and ethnicity and other factors relevant to monitoring inequalities, as a minimum. Therefore, not only are thorough and transparent gender-differentiated statistics and indicators vital as an accountability methodology, they are also fundamental as a component of gender mainstreaming and as a means to develop appropriate financing strategies and for the fulfilment of human rights and gender equality commitments.

## Indicators and Data Frameworks

The indicators for the SDGs represent one of the most ambitious data frameworks ever developed and are the basis for understanding whether the SDGs are being achieved. However, as these indicators focus on results in numbers, not experiences or the processes by which we achieve those results, a lot of information can be omitted or even erased through the process of data collection. This is seen by CSOs and NGOs who collect and access unique types of data, particularly for marginalised, disadvantaged and discriminated against groups, which may be otherwise underrepresented or hidden in traditional data sets. To continue to improve SDG monitoring and to ensure high-quality and accurate data, we have to ask, what do the indicators *not* tell us. More information is still needed, and there is an urgent need for indicators that encapsulate the full ambitions of the 2030 Agenda.

Soroptimist International recommends:

- Strengthen gender-responsive national statistical systems and data collection to support and promote gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting and to ensure gender-responsive follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, as well as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.
- Developing qualitative indicators that address whether programmes that contribute to the achievement of the SDGs are of a high-quality, and that report the experiences individuals, communities and cultures have of sustainable development, in particular women of all ages and girls and those who have been left furthest behind.
- At a minimum, all data should be disaggregated on the basis of age, sex, geography, income, disability, race and ethnicity and other factors relevant to monitoring inequalities.
- All data collection, monitoring, evaluation and capacity building processes take a human rights-based approach, be inclusive and non-discriminatory and include gender-sensitive mechanisms including gender differentiated indicators and statistics.
- That states produce regular statistics of critical importance for gender equality such as time use, asset ownership, women’s participation in decision-making at all levels, or data on all forms of gender-based violence and poverty.
- Enhancing technical and financial collaboration between countries to ensure better information management and coordination, and developing secure data repositories.
- Take urgent action to further national capacities for safe data collection, management and analysis, including through partnerships for development that involve states, NGOs, civil society, the private sector, academia and other development agents.
- The use of innovative data including geospatial data, micro-data and qualitative data and developing new types of data to promote effective policies and practices.
- Continually reviewing all SDG indicators and available data to ensure that the gathered information reflects the full content, aims and ambitions of the SDGs.



## Indicators Under the Microscope: SDG4 &SDG5

Given the importance that indicators and data have in implementing and monitoring the SDGs, it is crucial to analyse and critique those indicators and the data that comes from them to ensure the highest quality data possible is gathered. Therefore, it is key that every indicator is assessed to see whether it fully reflects the content, ambitions and aims of each SDG target. Below are only some examples of targets and indicators from SDG4 and SDG5 which demonstrate how indicators can fall short of the aims of the SDGs, in particular relating to gender equality.

### 4 QUALITY EDUCATION



## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 4

### ENSURE INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION AND PROMOTE LIFELONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

**Target 4.3** By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university

**Indicator 4.3.1** Participation rate of youth and adults in formal and non-formal education and training in the previous 12 months, by sex

Like many of the indicators for SDG4, indicator 4.3.1 calls for data to be disaggregated by sex, but not by other factors, omitting information on ethnicity, race, age, disability and other factors critical to understanding the impacts of intersecting discrimination. Their experiences are diluted by the experiences of the majority. In addition, there is no indicator to measure whether the training and education being

provided is indeed *quality education*, or affordable. Without highlighting these dimensions of implementation, the data collected according to this indicator will not provide accurate information on whether there is *equal* access to quality education technical, vocational and tertiary education. It will be impossible to know whether SDG4.3 has actually been achieved.

**5** GENDER  
EQUALITY



**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 5**

**ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER ALL  
WOMEN AND GIRLS**

**Target 5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation**

**Indicator 5.2.1 Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by form of violence and by age**

Target 5.2 is a crucial and highly ambitious target, addressing all forms of violence against women and girls committed both in the public and private spheres. Unfortunately, Indicator 5.2.1 systematically narrows the scope of Target 5.2, to the point of making statistics about Target 5.2 functionally meaningless. Despite Target 5.2 specifying ‘all women and girls’, the indicator only requires information to be gathered for those over the age of 15 — it tells us nothing about violence committed against girls under 15. Additionally, data will only be collected by those ‘ever-partnered’ and on violence committed by a former or current intimate partner. Nothing in the indicator specifies the need to account for whether violence was perpetrated in the public or private sphere. This means that this indicator will never provide data on violence perpetrated against never partnered women, nor violence

committed by family members, those in positions of power, or by strangers. It provides no information about violence committed in work places, online, on the street, in conflict and post-conflict environments, in humanitarian situations, in institutions, in the home when the perpetrator was never an intimate partner or in numerous other situations where women and girls have frequently report situations of violence. We will learn little about instances of femicide, trafficking, sexual harassment, sexual assault, cases of child sexual or physical exploitation or abuse, non-marital or non-intimate partner rape, or non-domestic physical, sexual or psychological abuse. Huge amounts of critical information about violence against women and girls are erased by this indicator, which means it will be impossible to know whether target 5.2 is achieved.

**TARGET 5.a** Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws

**INDICATOR 5.a.1** (a) Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex; and (b) share of women among owners or rights-bearers of agricultural land, by type of tenure

**INDICATOR 5.a.2** Proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women’s equal rights to land ownership and/or control

Target 5.a addresses a broad range of factors connected to the economic rights of women. Crucially, the target itself is already narrow, only looking at whether women’s legal rights exist and not whether women can access those rights. It contains the significant caveat “in accordance with national laws”, meaning this target will not apply to all countries. Then, the indicators add their own narrowing of the target, focusing only on agricultural land and whether legal frameworks guaranteeing

women’s equal rights to land ownership and control exist (and *not* whether they are implemented or experienced by women). While the first indicator has the advantage of looking at whether women have ownership, and not just the possibility of ownership, it only looks at agricultural land and at none of the other factors in the target. This means these indicators do not tell us about women’s *real* experience of equal rights to economic resources.



## Call to Action

This report addresses the critical importance that means of implementation have for the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women of all ages. SI grassroots projects show how women can be drivers of sustainable development, transforming the lives of individuals and their communities. Not one of the SDGs will be achieved without including women of all ages and girls as equal partners. The implementation of programmes, data collection and financing for development to achieve the SDGs is not gender-neutral. Based upon the projects carried out by SI members within the communities, as showcased by the projects in this report, SI calls upon all development actors to expedite efforts to achieve the SDGs by:

- Ensuring programmes to achieve the SDGs are inclusive and accessible for all – this requires renewed and increased efforts to reach those who experience multiple forms of discrimination and those who live in vulnerable and marginalised communities.
- Requiring all actions to implement and achieve the SDGs adopt a human rights-based approach, including the human rights of women and girls under international law. All states should ratify and remove their reservations from CEDAW.
- Working with women of all ages to develop and implementing gender-sensitive and gender-responsive National Action Plans, in collaboration with all sustainable development actors and stakeholders.
- Expediting action to remove all barriers to gender equal opportunities in the public, private, economic and social spheres and scale-up action to ensure women’s equal participation in all levels of leadership, decision-making and implementation.
- Ensuring national budgetary spending and all forms of financing for development use gender-budgeting to use funds most effectively and efficiently for sustainable development.
- Taking urgent steps to ensure that all states, communities and homes are free from all forms of gender-based violence. This will require cultural programmes, working with communities and the allyship of men and boys.
- Responding to the impacts of natural disasters, humanitarian situations and other crisis through systems and programmes that address the humanitarian-development nexus to ensure gender-equal crisis-response and sustainable development.
- Continuing to develop capacities for data collection, interpretation and analysis, including the creation of new qualitative indicators. Understanding the quality of sustainable development activities is vital to assessing whether the SDGs have been achieved.

The current global context of the COVID-19 pandemic, impending economic challenges, climate change, increased migration, and conflict means that we need the SDGs more than ever. The success of the SDGs requires the concerted and collective actions of all stakeholders, including governments, civil society and the private sector. As well as increased political will, we need determined action to ensure the gender-sensitive and gender-responsive implementation of the SDGs.

# VOICE OF THE VOICELESS

## Soroptimist International Projects

### Mobilising International Solidarity, Accelerating Action and Embarking on New Pathways to Realise the 2030 Agenda

#### The Soroptimist Six: Ending FGM

#### “The Road to Equality” SI President’s International Appeal, 2019-2021

Focusing on capacity building, and global north global south partnerships, SI’s International President’s Appeal “The Road to Equality” incorporates a range of projects that address key gender equality issues including Female Genital Mutilation. Through building networks, knowledge sharing, transferring resources, and highlighting facts and stories, women and girls can become drivers of gender equality and the sustainable change they want. The purpose of the appeal is to mobilise action and international solidarity while equipping women and girls with the knowledge and skills they need to advocate for themselves to bring an end to FGM and other forms gender-based violence and discrimination.

Female genital mutilation is a worldwide human rights issue. No woman or girl should be affected by FGM. However, it is estimated that more than 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone female genital mutilation in the countries where the practice is concentrated. Furthermore, there are an estimated 3 million girls at risk of undergoing female genital mutilation every year. The majority of girls are cut before they turn 15 years old.

To eradicate FGM, SI partnered with the Global Media Campaign as part of the “Road to

Equality” International President’s Appeal, to empower six grassroots activists who know how best to transform cultural norms and mindsets in their own communities. These activists, known as the “Soroptimist Six” will be supported through access to the media, new sources of funding and international solidarity that can enable the expansion of local projects to reach new communities.

Through the Global Media Campaign’s renowned media academies, activists are trained in awareness raising and advocacy skills, gaining experience in using the latest

technologies to spread the message about how FGM destroys lives. SI's "Road to Equality" Direct Action Grants ensure that more inspirational young activists working to end FGM are able to participate in the Media Academy — they can then go on to develop their own powerful messages that are specific and relevant to their regions and networks. It is by empowering women and girls in their own communities that real change can be made, and FGM can be eradicated.

Here, SI introduces two of the Soroptimist Six, Rugiatu Neneh Koroma Turay from Sierra Leone and Ayodeji Bello from Nigeria.

**Rugiatu Neneh Koroma Turay**, Soroptimist Six activist and founder and Executive Director of the Amazonian Initiative Movement (AIM) campaigns against FGM in Sierra Leone. As well as working with women and girls, she frequently focuses her work on changing the minds and attitudes of men. With her media skills, Rugiatu is able to broaden her message and reach new communities, as she did in February 2020 when she brought panellists together on radio kolenten in the Kambia

district to discuss the dangers of FGM and the need to shift to the new Bondo without blood initiative. This one hour programme reached over 20,000 listeners who were able to call in and ask questions.

Further raising the issue of FGM among communities, on the 7<sup>th</sup> March 2020, Rugiatu held a symposium 'Men take action to protect women and girls from cultural violence' which involved religious leaders, traditional leaders, teachers, civil society and youth who came together to speak on the topic of FGM. At the end of the day, radio discussions were organised on two radio stations in Port Loko town. On 8 March 2020 at the Mafulka village in the Tonkolili district Northern Province of Sierra Leone, stakeholders from 12 villages were brought together to discuss how to promote women in the decision-making process and support them to abandon the cutting of the clitoris to maintain Bondo culture.

FGM often is considered to be a rite of passage, initiating a girl into womanhood. For Rugiatu, it is important to maintain Bondo culture and rites of passage but without cutting. New ways



Photo: Event held at Mfulka village in the Tonkolili district

of carrying out old traditions need to be found, supporting the Bondo culture while eliminating the harmful practice of FGM. It is often men, who are religious, cultural and community leaders who are able to support the changing of traditions and the new alternative rites of passage. Alternative rites of passage are becoming increasingly popular, but these new traditions need to take into account the need to find new ceremonies and maintain the prestigious social role that 'cutters' have played. In the instructions that precede ceremonies, girls and are able to intertwine ideas on human and cultural rights with their own community's traditions and values.

Rugiatu explains: "Bondo society is a place where women can learn and imbibe the culture of good leadership in their communities, adding that this is still the case with the new model – the only difference is that it no longer needs to involve shedding any blood" Now, at the end of the ceremonies, women are elected to serve as

head women in their communities and more men are becoming committed to protecting their daughters from being cut. Men joining this message is extremely powerful as it is not the choice of girls to be cut, but their families and elders. That men attending this ceremony on International Women's Day spoke positively about it in TV interviews will encourage more men to make the same change in their views about FGM ensuring more girls are not cut.

*The 2017 Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) shows Sierra Leone to be amongst the countries in Africa with the highest prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). In the Southern province of Sierra Leone, approximately 83% of all women and girls have undergone FGM whilst in the Northern Province, the prevalence is 93%. Eastern Province 91% and Western Area 77% respectively*

### About FGM

Female genital mutilation and cutting involved the total or partial removal of, or damage to highly sensitive genital tissue, especially the clitoris. Depending upon the type of FGM performed, it may also involve the removal or damage of the labia minora and labia majora, and the stitching of the cut areas together. This traumatic and medically unnecessary procedure brings with it significant health risks to the victims and survivors of FGM. Physical health problems for women and girls include problems in childbirth such as postpartum haemorrhage, obstetric tears and lacerations, infections, chronic pain and sexual dysfunction. Psychologically, those who have been cut are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders and depression. There are higher risks for the children of mothers who have undergone FGM as well. These women experience higher rates of stillbirths, neonatal death and the need for their infants to be resuscitated after delivery. For many, it is challenging to even hear what FGM involves, but this knowledge is key in combatting its perpetuation and encouraging alternative rites of passage which allow girls and women to remain healthy and in control of their own bodies.

**Ayodeji Bello**, Soroptimist Six activist in Nigeria, founded the Initiative for Girls’ Rights and Health Development in 2015 and establishing her own platform to achieve her ambition to eradicate FGM within a generation. As a self-described survivor of FGM, her reason for campaigning against FGM is simple — no one else should go through it.

Through the Global Media Campaign Academy, Ayodeji learned more about FGM. The course covered medical facts and laws surrounding the practice, as well as media strategies, ethical reporting and how to amplify her activism. Her approach is to replace FGM with comprehensive sexuality education, using a four-week curriculum on sexual health and reproductive rights that seeks to empower girls through knowledge about their own bodies. Even if the girls she educates have already undergone FGM, one day these girls will be parents. Ayodeji’s aim is to persuade these girls and women against cutting their daughters.

Through her experiences in schools and communities, she has found that teaching, sensitising and storytelling are all effective tools for positive social change against FGM. She frequently works with traditional rulers, religious leaders, local cutters, midwives, youths and other influential community stakeholders. Ayodeji intentionally involves religious leaders in her advocacy as she finds that this makes communities more willing to participate in and be open to her sensitising workshops.

Ayodeji’s strength and talent as an activist was borne out when the Ooni of Ife joined her campaign. In Ayodeji’s own words, “My

greatest success story so far is getting the most influential traditional ruler, spiritual leader and number one person of the Yoruba race, The Ooni of Ife to join my campaign against FGM/C in Nigeria. That recognition and support from His Imperial Majesty the Ooni of Ife brought about a drastic reduction in the practice as other Royal fathers who look up to Ooni joined the end FGM/C moving train. This was a first in Nigeria, because we are very keen on cultural practices and coming from the Ooni made it seem like a mystery.”



Photo: Ayodeji Bello

In addition to working with religious leaders, Ayodeji runs a counselling service that supports other survivors of FGM and other harmful practices such as breast ironing. Empowered by her media training, she has also spoken on over twenty national television and radio shows and written newspaper articles, reaching millions of Nigerians. Looking forward, Ayodeji aims to work with law makers, the police and legal services as while legislation exists on paper it has not been enforced. Without there being strong rule of law and a cultural acceptance of those laws, it will not be possible to eradicate FGM in its entirety.

*“As I turned 6 years old, early in the morning there was a lot of excitement in my grandmother’s house, the girl is going to be cleaned to start her journey towards “Womanhood”. I was also carried away in this excitement; little did I know that day would change my life forever. My mother was the only one sad, she was opposed to the act, the female circumcision, but was overruled by her elder sister and my father. I was given a very cold bath, then taken to this dark room where an elderly lady was waiting, my legs were held apart and the cut was made, I could not cry as my mouth was closed, no medication was applied, legs were tight together, urine was the only cleanser. I was very proud as I emerged from this room two weeks later, in new clothes, gifted by all women, lots of food served to celebrate. Sixty years down, I still feel the effect of this day.”*

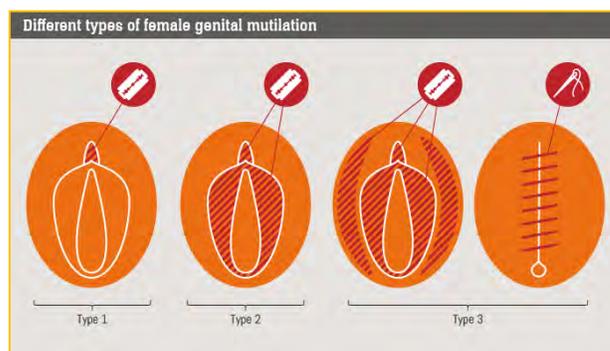
*My Story — Asha W. Abdulrahman, SI Kenya*

## Building a Network against FGM: Germany SI Heidelberg

In a network of German SI clubs, SI Heidelberg—recognising that FGM is not just an “African problem” or an “Asian problem” but a German problem—implemented a series of practical projects to combat the phenomenon of FGM. Around 65,000 women and girls affected by FGM live in Germany, and at least 15,500 girls are at risk of FGM. Many families continue the tradition on their daughters, with the practice often being carried out during visits to their home country.

SI Heidelberg, in collaboration with SI clubs across Germany identified three core avenues for FGM prevention: providing information on FGM to families and those working with children; to strengthen the voice of women and communities speaking out against FGM; and, raising awareness of the prevalence of FGM and its impact upon women in Germany. Those who work with children and their families will already be in a position of trust, and can be well placed to share information and to identify girls at risk of FGM. SI clubs held a session called “Female Genital Mutilation – context, help and prevention”. By working with paediatricians

and gynaecologists, midwives, educators and teachers, refugee aids, staff of social, psychological and legal institutions, victims and community leaders, new networks were able to be developed to ensure a better preventative safety-net to end FGM.



The session featured speakers from Jawahir Cumar, the Managing Director of ‘Stop Mutilation’ and a medical presentation by gynaecologist Dr. Christoph Zerm. By providing a critical space for those affected by FGM and for those who are best-placed to provide support to those who have experienced FGM and those at risk, SI Heidelberg was able to provide a platform to empower these stakeholders to develop new pathways to bring an end to the presence of FGM in Germany.

## Empower Women and Girls in Rural Areas: Togo SI Lomé-Aurore

In November 2019, the Soroptimist club of Lomé Aurore (Togo) launched a campaign on the themes: sexual violence against girls in urban and wider rural areas; and, awareness of the phenomenon of sexually exploited girls who are forced to exchange sex (often unprotected) for money or other goods. The club organized a discussion and dialogue session on these themes. The session had a large audience, aided by the presence of the Minister of Social Action for the Promotion of Women and Literacy who accepted the invitation of SI Lomé-Aurore to raise awareness among the target population. The campaign quickly gained media attention, further supporting the spread of awareness raising and knowledge about sexual violence and exploitation.

The campaign sought to address specific target groups, with the perspective that these groups were either particularly vulnerable to violence and exploitation, were the perpetrators, or were in a position to prevent and mitigate

violence and exploitation. The target groups were primary and junior high school girls, girls who work on the border corridor and are vulnerable to trafficking, adult learners at evening courses, teachers and professors, and parents. Educational facilities were approached as an excellent gateway to accessing members of communities.

Through the campaign, SI Tomé raised awareness and knowledge of violence and exploitation; frequently, women and girls may not recognise their situation as an exploitative one preventing them from seeking support. Services are often much harder to access in rural areas as well, creating addition barriers to addressing violence and exploitation and making those communities more vulnerable. The campaign helped victims and survivors to break the silence around gender-based violence by approaching the stigma head-on and encouraging men to become actively engaged in the struggle against all forms of



violence against women. Lastly, the campaign highlighted the legal remedies available for those who had experienced gender-based violence.

Rural women and girls face unique challenges that are directly linked to gender inequality and structural barriers, including women's unequal

access to power and resources which disadvantages and discriminates against women and girls living in rural areas. Addressing the complex development challenge of gender-based violence requires significant learning and knowledge sharing through partnerships between institutions and long-term programmes.

## Supporting an investigative newspaper in Moldova: Norway SI Bærum

Moldova has one of the highest rates of human trafficking, including sex trafficking, in Europe as widespread poverty and unemployment drive many young people, mostly women, to look for work overseas, according to the United Nations migration agency (IOM). To address this, SI Bærum contacted the founder and chief editor of the Moldovan newspaper *Ziarul de Gardă*, the defender of women's human rights, Ms Alina Radu. The newspaper is given to women, including those in rural areas, to inform about human trafficking and other important issues that could affect them. Trafficking generates illegal profits of \$150 billion a year globally, with about 40 million people estimated to be trapped as modern-day slaves — mostly women and girls — in forced labour and forced marriages, according to leading anti-slavery groups (IOM). By extending their support to *Ziarul de Gardă*, SI Bærum's project gives support to civic education, the prevention of human and sex trafficking, and promoting the realisation of women's and girls' human rights.

Alina Radu founded the Moldovan paper in 2004, within the aim of informing women about issues that directly affect them. The paper soon expanded to include a TV-station, which won a UN award for *Best strengthening human rights*

in Moldova in 2011. SI Bærum has provided support to the paper since 2006, and decided to support the paper permanently in 2012.



While the paper and this project pre-existed the SDGs, it is crucial to recognise the contributions of long-lasting programmes that achieve the ambitions of the SDGs. New projects are not always needed; more support must be given to projects that are already active in communities as they often can enact change more effectively.

## Protecting and Advancing Human Wellbeing and Ending Poverty

### Safe Cities for Women: Public Spaces and Transportation

#### SI Papua New Guinea

Without safe freedom of movement, women and girls are unable to participate in education, work and public life. For rural women farmers in Papua New Guinea the journey to sell their produce in markets in towns and cities can put them at risk of violence. The rates of violence against women in Papua New Guinea is extremely high, with one in four women having experience gender-based violence. In partnership with UN Women Papua New Guinea, SI Papua New Guinea have worked closely with local stakeholders to improve safety while traveling and in public areas. Particular attention has been paid to the markets and public transport, ensuring that they are fully accessible to women and girls. While the majority of food market vendors in Papua New Guinea are women, there are few toilet facilities, storage for produce or safe places to stay overnight. This leaves women vendors, and especially those who travel from rural areas, at risk of violence, harassment, victimisation and exploitation.

To ensure women's and girls' safety, Soroptimists provided training on and conducted a Women's Safety Audit, leading a team of CSOs, NGOs, government departments and businesses. Women's Safety Audits are a key mechanism to examine facilities and the gendered impacts of previously considered 'gender neutral' infrastructure. They facilitate women's inclusion in decision-making and town planning, and promote community safety. An audit allows women to identify issues of concern to them, including how well-lit

transport routes and public areas are, whether there are safe sanitation facilities and places to stay at night, and whether the way the market is set-up facilitates harassment because women can be more easily isolated or hidden. The audit identified twenty-two recommendations, with seven requiring immediate action. These included painting of zebra crossings, securing proper signs and notice boards, and utilizing the PA system in the market to conduct awareness ranging from human rights to health and hygiene, to traffic and road safety.

In addition to the audit, SI organised a practical session at the main market, as well as public information and safety campaigns. To improve safety on public transport, meetings were held with bus owners, providing them with information about women's and girls' safety and supporting them to introduce new safety precautions.

As violence against women has multifaceted impacts, these safety measures will not only reduce instances of gender-based violence, they will ensure women are better able to participate in their communities and have economic opportunities. Currently, many women have to choose between working in an unsafe environment or not working and face risks of poverty. This is not a choice they should have to make, and by using gender and women's safety audits, it is straightforward to overcome barriers to economic participation and both promote women's wellbeing and eradicate poverty.

## Soroptimist Skills Center for Trafficking Survivors: United States of America SI Vandalia

Working with Eden’s Glory, a safe home for the survivors of human trafficking, SI Vandalia established a skills and vocational training centre. After the project commenced in early 2019, the safe workspace was equipped with the tools needed for vocational training, allowing participants to develop skills in auto mechanics, home maintenance and landscaping. As well as focusing upon these skills, each training session also focused upon developing the trafficking survivor’s sense of self-confidence.

There are up to four women living at Eden’s Glory at any one time, allowing for them to receive specific and targeted support. SI Vandalia provides the vocational skills training, including dry wall repair, an introduction to plumbing, carpentry, gardening, car maintenance and other frequently male-

dominated activities. Practical skills provided through vocational training are able to give independence and facilitate the participants’ ability to take control of their surroundings and improve them. They are better able to find new employment opportunities, start their own businesses and support their families, further supporting their empowerment and psychological rehabilitation.

Survivors of trafficking repeatedly report that one of the biggest barriers to recovery is being able to provide for themselves. Many are trafficked as children and are without qualifications. Appropriate training and resources—adjusted to account for the psychosocial care survivors may need—are urgently required to ensure that trafficked women are not at risk of living in poverty.



Photo: Soroptimists raising awareness about human trafficking

## Are We Leaving no one Behind in Eradicating Poverty and Working Towards the 2030 Agenda?

### Yiyili Aboriginal Community School Vocational Training: Australia SI Brighton and Southern Districts

Yiyili Aboriginal Community School is situated in the heart of the Kimberley region of Western Australia on the community's traditional lands. Addressing historical discrimination in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal peoples, the school has supported the community in improving literacy, and reaffirming their cultural identity and language.

As a key focal point for the community, Yiyili Aboriginal Community School provides an excellent environment to provide vocational training to the wider Aboriginal community. Working in partnership with the community, SI Brighton and Southern Districts supported the development and implementation of vocational training of skills that can be used both within and outside of the community, therefore enabling participants to decide how they can best use their newfound skills. Women participants accessed courses in catering, hospitality and barista training resulting in nationally accredited certification, while children participated in age-appropriate courses in cookery, nutrition and food safety. With this remote community opening up to tourism, these skills will enable women, and in future years the youth, to identify new economic opportunities for themselves, allowing them to determine their community's development. This is particularly powerful for

women who may not have educational qualifications and low literacy rates.



There is a long history of discrimination and oppression of the Aboriginal people in Australia, and they continue to be at risk of lower health, educational and economic outcomes. Rather than imposing modes of sustainable development upon Aboriginal communities, it is vital to work with them to implement the projects and programmes they know will work and that address the challenges they experience. This is the case for all indigenous people, who are at a greater risk of being left behind in pursuit of the SDGs, with their knowledge being disregarded and their continuing to face racism and discrimination.

# EDUCATE EMPPOWER ENABLE

## Transforming Lives: Brazil SI Porto Alegre

Supporting women who are living in situations of economic and social vulnerability, the Transforming Lives project provides twenty women with vocational training and entrepreneurship to become beauticians, allowing them to enter the labour market and establish their own businesses. Working with deaf and hearing women aged 16-24 who have previously experienced gender-based violence, SI Porto Alegre's Transforming Lives project works in partnership with Reviver Social Services to ensure that participants are able to re-integrate into their communities and, gain confidence in their family and social relationships. The courses run for a six month period before the participants are certified as beauticians. By working with Reviver Social Services, SI Porto Alegre has been able to quickly identify those living in marginalised communities, often in temporary or make-shift housing or as squatters and who are vulnerable to remaining in a cycle of poverty.

Precarity and a lack of stable economic opportunities means many younger women are at risk of sexual exploitation, drug and human trafficking, and other illegal activities which can

seem lucrative when there is disproportionate competition for low-paying alternatives. High competition for employment also means that temporary unemployment can quickly become permanent, with workers struggling to return to work. Young women also face the compounding challenge of unplanned and under-aged pregnancy, which raises additional barriers to education and employment. The realities for many young people in the communities SI Porto Alegre work with is that there are few decent job prospects, few incentives to study, poor access to education, racial discrimination and poverty. All of these risks and realities are accentuated for women living with disabilities.

The Transforming Live project seeks to break these cycles of unemployment, poverty and exploitation by providing participants with marketable and desirable skills. By providing additional entrepreneurial skills, the project also means that women will be able to work independently to their own schedule and needs, and not depend upon a job search.

## Transformative pathways to realize the 2030 Agenda: a whole of society approach

### Soroptimist Puberty Organising Toolkit (SPOT): Malaysia SI Petaling Jaya

Pioneered by SI Petaling Jaya and now a widely adopted by Malaysian SI clubs, the SPOT programme was created by girls for girls and focuses upon Comprehensive Sexuality Education. Through SPOT young women are encouraged to develop a positive attitude towards their own bodies and sexual and reproductive health, as well as skills to further the social and personal development. The SPOT programme used a variety of activities, often through schools and universities in order to maximise outreach. Between 2015 and 2019, the SPOT programme has reached over 10,500 children in 6 states.

In one SPOT event, in collaboration with UNHCR and Rohingya Women Development Network, the SPOT programme addressed period poverty, contraception and safe sanitation among the Rohingya community in Malaysia. Furthering this issue, SPOT is currently planning a period poverty study to properly understand its extent and impact on women living in Malaysia. Other SPOT events include “Let’s Talk about Sex: Nothing to Hide” where mothers and daughters are given a safe environment to discuss health and relationships and can learn about sexual health and reproductive rights.

“Train the Trainer”. Train the Trainer events are held multiple times a year, where existing volunteer SPOT trainers, themselves girls and young women, train other girls between 16-18 in how to provide educational sessions for their peers aged 9 to 16. In order to reach girls from marginalised groups including orphans, refugee

and stateless children, those who participate in “Train the Trainer” frequently come from those backgrounds themselves.

As part of the SPOT programme, a safe question and answer platform offered by text and Whatsapp was established. This platform allows girls to ask questions anonymously, these questions will be answered by a panel of experts, including child and family psychologists and public and sexual health specialists. Key issues raised by the questions can be shared on social media allowing a wider audience to learn key sexual health information.

The SPOT team has continued to work on national policy development, providing inputs into the Child Rights Coalition Malaysia Report, contributing to sections on child participation, illicit adoption, education, freedom of religion and beliefs, and child trafficking. Organisations that run programmes like SPOT are experts in the needs of the communities they come from and support; their policy guidance should be treated accordingly. Their inclusive and age-appropriate approach means that the SPOT programme is able to reach a wide section of society through education, supporting a whole of society approach to sexual health and reproductive rights.

The transformative impact of this project was recognised by President and Mrs Obama, as Siti Aishah the founder of SPOT was selected to be part of the 2019 Class of the Obama Foundation Program. As part of 2019 Class, Siti Aishah will

gain guidance and support from Michelle Obama in the common goal towards empowering adolescent girls through education, allowing them to achieve their full potential and transform their families, communities and countries. The Australian High Commission has also offered its partnership and support for SPOT in 2020 for providing comprehensive sexuality education to children in Malaysia. These types of high-profile

partnerships should be more widely adopted to fulfil the ambitions of the SDGs and ensure a whole of society approach. Girls are often targeted as recipients of sustainable development, but should be empowered to drive the changes they need and want, as they will be the ones who will need to take on continuing and new sustainable development challenges in 2030.

### Young Footballers and Healthy Relationships: UK SI Lichfield and District

Projects to combat gender-based violence disproportionately focus upon women, despite the fact the violence is most frequently committed by men. Accordingly, it is vital that men and boys are engaged as allies to achieve gender equality and the elimination of violence against women and girls. Working with West Midlands Police and the Buddy Bag Foundation, SI Lichfield and District organised an educational presentation given by two police officers to twenty boys aged 16-18 at Lichfield Football Academy. The police used their professional experience in dealing with sexual violence and harassment cases to explain the causes and impacts of abuse. As part of the presentation the police spoke about sex and the law, consent, pornography, and online safety and sexting. By making the session interactive, the participants were able to ask questions and debate with each other — this approach is much more likely to change minds and to improve personal understanding of relationship problems. Crucially, these problems were all tied to what a healthy relationship is, and how to recognise behaviour which can quickly become abusive.

Using empathy as a key tool for understanding the trauma that intimate partner violence and

abuse can have upon women and their children, the participants packed ‘Buddy Bags’ given to children who experience trauma when they arrive at shelters or temporary accommodation. This prompted the boys to understand the mindset of children who have witnessed or experience abuse and what it means to have to escape abusive situations with nothing.

Innovative partnerships will achieve the SDGs – working with sports organisations and other community institutions can mean that messages of equality reach new groups and can engage people in new ways. By engaging the private sector, civil society, communities and individuals the whole of society approach can strengthen resilience of communities to withstand threats to their health, security and well-being. For a whole of society approach to be successful, the problems that the SDGs seek to address must be seen as everyone’s problem. Solving the challenges of gender inequality should not only be considered the remit of women — men, who perpetuate gender norms and are often the perpetrators of gender inequality must be included in order to eradicate discrimination against women and girls.

## 'Shuuder' Girls Centre: Mongolia SI Erdenet

Violence, unemployment, trafficking, sex crimes and poverty are unfortunate realities for many girls living in some Mongolian communities and neighbourhoods. SI Erdenet's "Shuuder" Girls Centre confronts these risks by running a Peer Support Programme. Through this programme, teenage girls become leaders and peer educators, allowing them to go into schools and share their newfound leadership, advocacy, relationship and community skills. The Peer Support Programme has a developed curriculum which includes learning English, Japanese and about reproductive health. This curriculum is taught after school and during the weekends, providing the girls with a safe space to spend time while building their confidence and resilience. Sports events and team projects allow the girls to work together, while expanding the reach and awareness of the project within the community, therefore bringing more girls to the programme.

The 'Shuuder' Girls Centre has become a key feature within the community. Every year the programme's participants present issues, solve problems and motivate other girls during a Girls

Conference, cementing their leadership skills and facilitating their involvement in decision making and driving change in their communities. Due to the multifaceted educational, health, safety, and economic benefits that the Peer Support Network has brought, the Centre and programme gained momentum from local authorities, schools, hospitals, and the police.

Since the "Shuuder" Girls Centre opened in 2017, the lives of more than 6000 teenage girls from high-risk backgrounds have been supported. The work of the Girls' Network has brought a reduction in violence and crimes against young women in their homes, communities and school districts through awareness raising sessions, campaigns, and leadership. Girls are able to be drivers of sustainable development as they are able to identify and respond to the issues that affect them. For them to do this, they must be equipped with the skills they need to make that change, and institutions and authorities must be prepared to listen to girls' perspectives and respond to the change that they ask for.



Photo: Trained Peer Educators

## Means of implementation to match the scope of the crisis and the breadth of our ambition for 2030

### SISK-IPER Free Legal Aid Clinic: India SI South Kolkata

On International Women’s Day 2020, a permanent free legal aid clinic was opened, specialising in supporting women and girls seeking guidance in cases of women’s rights and gender-based violence, especially where no redress or protection has been provided by the police. The clinic was opened in partnership with the Institute Of Psychological & Educational Research (IPER) and the State of West Bengal District Legal Aid Services and is the first of its kind in South 24 Parganas beyond the jurisdiction of the Alipore Court.

Many women and girls in South Kolkata’s communities experience violence, without access to recourse and little knowledge of their rights and the laws that are established to protect them. In marginalised and underprivileged communities, lower literacy rates further compound challenges in accessing information, services and protections. Without this knowledge few women and girls know that they can seek legal aid. At the launch, lawyers spoke to the audience, many of whom were unaware of legal aid services, about how women and girls can bring cases to the Dispute

Redressal Board, which could provide arbitration and free legal advice to the complainants.

The first clinic was held on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, and already five women sought advice and guidance from lawyers. Their cases ranged from being about marital issues, property and inheritance rights, and professional matters. Already women could further their cases with the District Legal Services Authority. As trust and knowledge of the SISK-IPER Free Legal Aid Clinic grows, more women will use this service. It is projected that hundreds of women will be able to use this service. With many targets within the SDGs focusing upon the creation of laws, including for equality, it is also important to remember that having laws in the statute books is not enough. All women and girls, including those who experience intersecting discrimination, must be able to access and benefit from those laws in order for legislation to fulfil its purpose. Policies, services and awareness raising around these laws are a critical means of implementation.

Photo: The inaugural presentation of the SISK-IPER Free Legal Aid Clinic



## India, SI Chembur, Mumbai

### 16 Days of Activism

One of the most significant challenges in overcoming gender-based discrimination is a lack of knowledge or confidence to take action against it. There are significant gaps between legislated rights and people's experiences of those rights. For women and girls, especially those who experience intersecting discrimination, accessing rights continues to be a challenge. Knowing their rights and the laws that protect them, can support women in demanding those rights be realised.

Through five sessions on the legal rights and laws for women in India, SI Chembur discussed India's Domestic Violence Act, women's human rights, property rights, gender roles, patriarchal mindsets, and accessing legal aid. These sessions were provided to 400 participants, including those with low levels of literacy — an additional barrier to knowledge of women's

rights. Technical legal issues were explained through relatable real-life situations, particularly around domestic violence. Demonstrating the prevalence of these problems, and the desire of women to use legislation and human rights as a tool to change their situation, many of the participants spoke to the facilitator individually about their own personal circumstances.

Legislation and legal rights are a critical tool for gender equality, but without knowledge of those rights or appropriate policies and services to actualise them, many women will never benefit from the breadth of ambition in the 2030 Agenda. CSOs and NGOs are vital in spreading awareness and reaching those most vulnerable and marginalised. These awareness raising activities should be recognised as a key means of implementation.

## Porto d'Abrigo Shelter for Domestic Violence's Victims: Portugal

### SI Porto Invicta

Domestic and intimate partner violence is a critical issue worldwide, and to support women and children leaving abusive environments SI Porto Invicta run a shelter called "Porto d'Abrigo". This shelter offers survivors the opportunity to benefit from psycho-social and educational support, with many of the women entering the shelter having a low level of education. Frequently, financial abuse and dependence is a core component of domestic violence, preventing the victim from being able to leave the perpetrator. Those staying at the shelter spend on average seven and a half months there, before being given support to find transitional housing where they can lead an independent life while still accessing the

support they need. Having a shelter like Porto d'Abrigo provides a physical space that allows women and their children to feel secure — critical for recovery. Porto d'Abrigo's seven-member team has welcomed 148 women and 179 children since its opening.

Despite being an essential service, NGOs and CSOs are frequently left to operate these crucial shelters without proper resourcing, and in spite of these barriers are able to provide incredible social support. With proper funding and resources, these services could be extended to all who need them, preventing homelessness, prolonged violence in the home and femicide, and minimising risks of poverty.

## The Humanitarian Development Nexus: Protecting the Planet and Building Resilience

### Women, Water and Leadership: Indonesia SI President's International Appeal, 2017-2019

*The International President's Appeal "Women, Water and Leadership" was designed to respond to the global water crisis and relieve the disproportionate impact on the lives of women and girls across the world. The sustainable programmes delivered by this Appeal used a human rights-based approach to tackle inequalities and discrimination in water infrastructure and access, food security and education. This approach when used in humanitarian and post-disaster settings, moves beyond the long-held stereotypes of women as 'victims' and 'beneficiaries' and creates opportunities for women in water resource governance and in water related professions. For this report, and focusing on the humanitarian-development nexus, SI will feature the Women, Water and Leadership project in Rembitan, Lombok, providing a follow-up on last year's HLPF report.*

The Indonesian island of Lombok was hit by two major earthquakes on 5 and 19 August 2018, causing devastation and officials estimating that at least 80% of structures in North Lombok were damaged and nearly 390,000 were displaced. Following the humanitarian disaster, many people were facing a public health crisis, as access to water and clean sanitation was very limited. The earthquakes also halted the tourism industry, a critical source of income. In response to the crisis where women from the central Lombok villages of Rembitan and Rebuk Satu were without water, sanitation and health facilities, the Women, Water and Leadership Appeal started to build male and female sanitation blocks, upgrade the well to ensure safe water and build community clothes washing centres. In addition, a local education centre started to deliver vocational training to women on water, waste water, waste management, water infrastructure maintenance and management. With their new skills being essential to the community, these women will be able to take up positions of

community leadership and have more opportunities at home, therefore combatting the perception that they have to move abroad to be able to work and support their families.

However, as will many sustainable development projects, the project in Lombok was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While some of the project's activities were temporarily closed, much of the remedial work with the WASH facilities could continue as they are considered essential services. This including fixing wastewater overflow and ensuring access to a new strong safe water source identified in late 2019. In order to respond to the future economic impacts of social isolation and lock-down, the Women, Water and Leadership Lombok project is planning additional income generating programmes that will be able to adapt to future COVID-19 measures and a gradual relaxation of social distancing measures. As the organic farming and weaving programmes taught by local women have been able to continue due to the participants being

able to learn either in isolation or at a distance from each other outside, the programme seeks to learn from these experience in order to adapt future programmes and re-instate the basic literacy classes which had to be suspended. One such programme will be “Train the Trainer” where skilled young women will train their peers and teenage girls to promote self-employment and decrease risks of child marriage, child labour and trafficking.

Without the Women, Water and Leadership programme having already commenced in Lombok, the impacts of COVID-19 would have likely been great; having safe sanitation facilities is critical to preventing disease spread, and the WASH facilities provided spaces where



information on COVID-19 could be shared. For disaster responsive projects to be implemented, it is essential that they take a humanitarian-development nexus approach, responding to immediate needs and ensuring long-term sustainable development.

### **Ba Women’s Forum: Fiji SI Ba**

Ba Women’s Forum is a long-stranding SI project that has built the capacity of, trained and empowered several hundreds of women who are victims of natural disasters and domestic violence aggravated by poverty, unemployment and homelessness. Si Ba raised the funds to build the training centre and run the courses full time. This programme has been a lifeline for older women, widows and women who are not able to be supported by their children and grandchildren. It has progressed with the partnership support of the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, Fiji.

Ba Women’s Forum Development and Training Centre was founded with the goal of assisting and empowering women to thrive in today’s highly competitive work environment. Many women need to learn new skills due to changing technologies, so computer skills and training courses have become central to the Centre. Other Courses that are run at the Training Centre include baking, seamstressing, weaving, iri making, tie dying, and floristry.

The Ba Women’s Forum bolsters women’s participation in the economy, improving their knowledge, capabilities, enabling their talents and improves their self-confidence. These aspects of personal development often go hand-in-hand with the women’s economic empowerment.

Members of SI Ba provide the training themselves, supporting women to learn new skills and make produce that can be sold. This includes producing handicraft, handbags and fashion jewellery, as well as aromatic soaps and candles, all of which are highly marketable and lucrative to the tourism sector.

The training centre provides opportunities for women to learn and educate themselves, and to create awareness of justice and equality, with the aim of creating a community of women living in dignity through their empowerment, self-reliance, economic stability and success.



## COVID-19, Gender Equality and the SDGs

### Building back better after COVID-19 and acting where we all will have the greatest impact on the SDGs

The current impacts of, and responses to, COVID-19 are quickly eroding long-fought-for gains towards gender equality in economic, social, cultural and political development. The pandemic is pushing the world into a severe economic crisis and there is increasing evidence that the poorest and most vulnerable, including women and girls, are being affected disproportionately by COVID-19. Globally, women make up three quarters of medical doctors and nursing personnel, increasing their exposure to the COVID 19 epidemic. The pandemic is also pushing millions of female workers into unemployment, underemployment and working poverty. Women have been the first to be furloughed or made redundant. Women’s employment is also often more precarious, informal or low-wage meaning that they face greater economic losses during this time of crisis. For example, globally, the income of informal workers—the majority of whom are women or girls—is estimated to have dropped by 60% in the first months of the crisis. With families’ incomes being squeezed, the prevalence of the cultural norm of the ‘son preference’ may return, as parents are forced to prioritize putting their resources into one child. All of these findings, many already reported at the national level and by CSOs and

NGOs, have now been affirmed by the 2020 Report of the UN Secretary General, ‘Progress Towards the Sustainable Development Goals’.<sup>v</sup>

Beyond what has been statistically measured, there is the unaccounted burdens on women or girls as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic. Prior to COVID-19 women already spent three times as many hours on unpaid care work at home as men.<sup>vi</sup> Now, at home, women are more likely to take on additional educational and caring roles in comparison to men living the in the same household — women are now teaching children and caring for the sick and vulnerable. Immediately we see the return of women’s traditional gender roles on top of other work women may have contributing to the re-trenching of social gender norms. Many girls have been taken out of education to return to household duties and may never return to school. Worldwide, COVID-19 responses rely upon the additional unpaid labour of women whose contributions are still under-recognised and under-valued.

Across the world rates of domestic violence have dramatically increased as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, placing severe pressure on already chronically under-funded services and

the NGOs and CSOs who provide them. There are also reports of increasing risks of forced, child and early marriage, trafficking, or girls being required to work to support their families. The digital divide means that women and girls who are trying to work and pursue their education at home may be unable to do so, widening the education and labour gender-gap.

The COVID-19 pandemic will also make it harder to achieve the gender-related goals of reducing maternal deaths, HIV infections, hunger, malnutrition, the digital divide or having equal access to safe and adequate housing, water and sanitation. That 700 million people are without access to safe drinking water, and 2.5 billion lack adequate and safe WASH facilities will make it harder to combat COVID-19. Women and girls without safe WASH facilities face differentiated impacts, including the burden and risks of collecting water. The 2.8 billion people without efficient and non-polluting cooking systems, many of whom are women and girls, are more vulnerable to lung diseases. Those in unsafe and substandard housing will be unable to practice social distance and other health measures that are essential to stop disease spread.

These realities must be taken into account in COVID-19 responses and actions taken to ensure gender-equal outcomes. Pre-existing gaps in sustainable development will mean that women and girls and marginalised communities are more at risk of COVID-19. Women must not be the social and economic casualties of COVID-19, as this would dramatically set-back efforts towards sustainable development and prevent

the recovery of communities and countries. There must be renewed political will, resources and focus on these and all other goals if they are to be achieved.

The interconnections between the SDGs and responses to the COVID-19 crisis should be acknowledged. Progress towards every single SDG will be negatively impacted by COVID-19. Health systems are being tested like never before; educational environments are changing rapidly; and violence and exploitation against women and girls is rising. Yet, even during a pandemic, the SDGs along with human rights provide a framework for constructive and progressive responses that places these human realities and impacts at their core. During times of crisis, while it is possible to return to the familiar and traditional ways of working — this would be regressive and hinder both the response to COVID-19, gender equality and sustainable development. Instead, now is the time for innovation; in order to recover faster and become more equal and prosperous. NGOs and CSOs, like Soroptimist International, are already active in providing support to vulnerable and marginalised sectors of society and modifying their programmes to ensure a gender-sensitive response to COVID-19. The impacts of coronavirus are first felt at the community level, with national impacts then being the cumulative effect. States should therefore immediately partner with CSOs and NGOs in order to reach impacted communities effectively and efficiently. Enabling and resourcing these organisations would greatly support national responses to COVID-19 that would promote gender-equality and sustainable development.

## Projects on COVID-19: Bolstering local action to control the pandemic and accelerate implementation

Organisations, individuals and communities across the world have rallied to combat COVID-19, and Soroptimist International is no exception. By already being active within their communities and working with vulnerable and marginalised women, SI has been able to quickly provide support and services to those most in need during the pandemic. This section features some of those projects.

### Community Support

#### Corona Virus Project Bridging the Technology Gap: Austria SI Austrian Union

With the lockdown and social distancing measures in Austria preventing people from visiting family members and loved ones in hospital, SI Austria Union decided to take action to help retirement and care home residents stay in contact with their family and friends. Older women make up the majority of residents in Austrian stationary care facilities, with between 70-75% of residents being women. Many of these women do not have access to smart phones or other forms of technology that would allow them to communicate with their families and friends remotely but still ‘face-to-face’. This places a significant psychological and social strain on them, contributing to the isolation that many older people experience.

Using donations and reserve and surplus funds, SI Austria Union purchased 125 tablets in April. These tablets would be much more user friendly than smart phones, as being larger they would be easier for those unfamiliar with smart phones or with visual impairments or hand mobility issues to use. By 8 May, all the tablets had arrived and a team of five lead by a Soroptimist and IT specialist was able to communicate with retirement and care home staff remotely, supporting that all the tablets were set up successfully. The project was well received by the residents, helping them feel closer to their loved ones during difficult times. Already there has been over twenty-five newspaper stories about the project along with radio interviews.

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*"This awful nightmare will end. But the choices we make now could change our lives for years to come. They should create new dynamics capable of connecting the economy, society and the environment in order to create a more just, more humanist, and more liveable community."*

— Evelyne Para, SI UN Representative UNESCO

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## Providing Psychological Support: Italy

### SI Italian Union

With many finding the COVID-19 pandemic a psychologically difficult time due to isolation, loss, and increased anxiety, SI Italian Union launched a national project offering free psychological support during the pandemic. This service will support members of the public with dealing with the psycho-social impacts of the pandemic, which include stress,

experiencing increased inequalities, and domestic violence. Many professionals have made their expertise and experience available to offer telephone assistance, and the service will be managed by a team of 30 members including psychologists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, from Monday to Saturday via email and WhatsApp.

## Combatting Hunger During the Pandemic

### Hungerbuster Programme: Malaysia

#### SI Petaling Jaya

During the pandemic, with trade and shops being disrupted and many people losing their incomes, food insecurity and malnutrition are on the rise. Responding to this problem, SI Petaling Jaya started delivering fresh fruit, eggs, noodles and vegetables to three shelter homes, including a refugee centre. Through donations they were able to get a fridge for one of the shelters, ensuring that the food will be able to last longer and support improved food safety. So far 300 people have been supported by the programme during lockdown.



### Food for Children: Malaysia

#### SI Ipoh

Due to the pandemic and a Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia, many vulnerable families and their children continue to be severely affected, and struggle to provide food for their children. To support these families, SI Ipoh has supplied lunches for 30 children at the Bekor low-cost flats during lockdown period. The MCO means that travel is very difficult so instead of delivering the food themselves SI

Ipoh took a different approach. Simultaneously promoting women's employment during the MCO, SI Ipoh has employed a woman local to the flats to cook and supply the meals. Through this job, she is now also better able to feed her own family, showing that getting the response to COVID-19 right can have positive knock-on effects for the community.

## Continuing Child Feeding Schemes: South Africa

### SI Pretoria-Tshwane

Many disadvantaged children in South Africa receive their only meal of the day at school, and during the pandemic, these are of course now closed. One Soroptimist is principal of a school in Atteridgeville, an impoverished area West of Pretoria, and is in possession of a permission letter, allowing her to go out and about during the lockdown period. *SI Pretoria-Tshwane* decided to fundraise for emergency

food supply for school children of Makghato Primary School in Atteridgeville, who would normally be part of a feeding scheme at the school. The club considered this the fastest and most reliable way to get food out. The food was bought and distributed by the principal and team, to shelters in the area that families of the school children are living in.

## Food for Low-Income Women: Venezuela

### SI Caracas

SI Caracas was already working to support their 'Live Your Dream' award recipients before COVID-19 hit, with the aim of supporting those women through economic empowerment and further educational opportunities. When the pandemic hit, they did not let it stop them, and instead they continued to provide online workshops and training. Building in an

additional response to COVID-19 and understanding the vulnerable situations of the women SI Caracas was already supporting, the club started delivering food to low-income women and sharing infographics with critical information about preventing the spread of COVID-19 to keep their community safe.

## Supporting Victims of Violence

### Aid to a Domestic Violence Shelter: UK

#### SI Rossendale

With women more at risk from domestic violence during the pandemic the demand for the services of domestic abuse shelters is on the rise. With shelters being full and there being strict travel restrictions, many women are forced to stay at home with the perpetrator. Some victims had lost access to the support services they relied up and where facing additional challenges of loss of income and taking on home-schooling. In response, SI

Rossendale reached out to a refuge to ask how they were coping, and were given the message that it was tough; the demand on services were increasing and they were finding themselves stretched. Supplies of basic necessities were running low, and club members decided to use crowdfunding to raise funds to purchase essential items, from a community project 'The Red Bag Project', which provides such items. Over seven days, they raised over £250.

## Hygiene Poverty: UK SI Widnes

The resources available to women and children in shelters has always been limited. Many of those staying in shelters do not have a stable income, which can mean they experience hygiene poverty — where they are unable to afford items for personal care for themselves and their children. Responding to this during the COVID-19 crisis, SI Widnes donated nappies, wipes and toys for the children at Changing

Lives (Women’s Refuge). To support a local homeless charity, Night Stop, SI Widnes also helped equip two new houses with household items such as bedding, towels and kitchen utensils. This kind of in-kind support is essential during a pandemic, where finding the necessary resources to help homeless people is very challenging.

## National Centre Against Violence Mongolia, SI Ulaanbaatar

There has been a two-decade-long relationship between the National Centre Against Violence and SI Ulaanbaatar. Demonstrating their continuing support for the Centre and recognising a new acute need for resources

during the COVID-19 pandemic, the club donated food, children’s clothing and toys to the Centre to help during this time of crisis. For many of the residents who arrive with nothing, this will give them solace and reassurance.



Photo: SI Ulaanbaatar with their in-kind donations



## Supporting LDCs: Global South-North Partnerships

### Nepal Country Focus

Nepal was hit by a major earthquake in 2015. The devastation caused by the quake prompted international solidarity and action, with many governments and NGOs mobilising funding. With the aim of enabling women and girls in Nepal, SI formed partnerships for development with local communities and organisations. Many of these partnerships focused on rural areas, as many forms of traditional aid did not help those outside of the cities. Those living in rural Nepal often have limited educational and medicinal facilities, and as Nepal is a source country for trafficking, many girls face the risk of being exploited. Sustainable development projects focused on gender equality need, to take into account the real life situation for girls and women in rural communities, and seek to address these multifaceted dimensions and barriers to gender equality. The effects of natural disasters affect women and girls disproportionately, therefore specific and targeted attention must be given to them to provide them with the skills and knowledge necessary to eradicate continuing and often generational poverty.

### Educate to Lead: Nepal

#### SI President's International Appeal, 2015-2017

#### Educate to Lead: Removing Barriers to Education

In Thulipokhari, the 'Removing Barriers to Education' project, initiated by SI Truckee Meadows, Nevada, USA, used a comprehensive programme of scholarships to encourage and ensure that girls were able to attend school after the earthquake. A school dormitory was built, allowing girls living in rural areas who could not undertake daily travel to access

education. This dormitory was then equipped with clean cooking technology, solar generated electricity, computers, and safe sanitation facilities, thus building resilience and ensuring that the school's facilities were gender sensitive and environmentally sustainable. Through the 'Educate to Lead' Appeal, room and board could be provided for a further twenty girls, along

with their tuition, supplies and uniforms. These hidden costs of attending school often form the basis for reducing access to education.

Education scholarships were also provided to enable girls to attend school, with 900 girls successfully graduating the programme. To provide the girls who had graduated with an

income, 'Educate to Lead' provided finances for a micro-loan programme that supported graduates in establishing small businesses and transition from the world of education into the world of work. This had the added benefit of supporting the development of the local economy after disaster, which is key for community recovery.

### **Educate to Lead: Maiti Nepal**

The trafficking of women and children is a significant social problem in Nepal, with there being up to 12,000 victims per year. Findings from the National Human Rights Commission of Nepal indicated that trafficking rates only further increased after the 2015 earthquake. Maiti Nepal was founded by Anuradha Koirala. Starting out with only her savings, she has gone on to have rescued 29,000 women and children from the hands of traffickers. In partnership

with the Educate to Lead Appeal, Maiti Nepal was able to invest in their transit house in Kailali District. This transit house provides its 90 residents with psycho-social services including counselling, social reintegration and income generation training. This programme therefore not only tackles the root causes of trafficking, including poverty, but it enables women to return to their communities to start businesses and support wider development.



Photo: women of Tharu Village learning computer skills

## Empowering Girls Through Education SI North Shore Auckland in Partnership with GEE Nepal

GEE works to provide in-community support to girls whose situations are particularly vulnerable, who live in poverty and who would not otherwise go to school. GEE guarantees funding the girls they work with until their final school exams, and encourage the financial support for further education, be it vocational or tertiary studies. They also run a trafficking-prevention programme to prevent girls' exploitation. In partnership with SI, GEE was able to support an additional 16 girls, who live in the village of Saptari, East Nepal. The girls were identified due to their individual situation and the economic challenges their families and

communities faced after the village had been burnt down and faced further damage after the 2015 earthquake. Scholarships and other supports to help girls and women gain education and skills are critical sustainable development mechanisms. Too many families do not have the resources to overcome hidden and up-front financial barriers to education, forcing them to choose one child who can access education. Frequently, boys are given this opportunity over girls; eliminating these cost barriers to education is crucial for gender equality.

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*"I wouldn't be able to study and work towards my dream of studying languages if it weren't for the sponsorship I receive from GEE. After the 2015 earthquake my home was destroyed and my family had to start over with nothing. GEE also helped provide the funds for blankets, food and temporary shelter for my family during that time."*

*— GEE Scholarship Recipient*

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## Days for Girls, SI Trukee Meadows

The practice of chhaupadi, where girls and women are required to live in make-shift huts or cattle sheds during menstruation, was outlawed by the Court of Nepal in 2005, but the tradition has been slow to change as insufficient action has been taken within the communities that practice chhaupadi. Through this project, reusable and sustainable menstruation kits and sanitary wear has been distributed to 15,000 girls. These kits are made locally by funded women-led micro enterprises in five villages in western Nepal, before being distributed in schools and communities. While distributing the menstruation kits in schools,

informational sessions are run providing knowledge about menstruation and engaging with traditional customs about menstruation. This project has been affected by COVID-19 as schools are no longer running, movement is prohibited, and people are staying home. To adapt, by working with staff at local schools, instructions are being developed to help girls make their own kits at home. Menstruation kits have been home delivered to disabled girls who are unable to leave their communities. Through using existing networks and infrastructure, the project has been able to respond and continue in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis.

## Microfinance, SI Vienna

Through the Outreach Center Bahinipati, SI Vienna has been able to distribute microloans to women looking to gain training and start their own businesses. Through the combination of education, vocational training and financial support, women who receive the loans are able to input into the local economy, create new employment opportunities and support their families. These direct cash payments are a vital form of development; individual recipients are

best placed to know what an effective use of the funds would be. While there is increasing evidence demonstrating the efficacy of cash transfer programmes, this has been known by CSO and NGO organisations and networks for years. With €103 000, SI Vienna have been able to sponsor over 700 women between 2015-17. Now, as the loans are beginning to be repaid, new microloans are able to be distributed to continue supporting Nepalese women.

## Looking Forward

### Empowering Girls in Nepal SIGBI Federation Project 2019-22

This project supports survivors of violence against women, and vulnerable and abused girls, helping them rebuild their lives through education and training. In a three-year partnership with ChoraChori, this project seeks to respond to the increasing rates of violence against women and girls. In Nepal, reported cases of rape have quadrupled in the last decade. There are many instances where victims are required to marry the perpetrators of violence and rape. Many of those supported

through this partnership gain legal support, allowing them to take cases of rape and trafficking to court. They are also provided with psycho-social support including at a purpose-built child trauma management centre. Through this partnership, this project will be able to expand the rehabilitation services provided to women and girls, by providing training and tuition fees, necessary medical support, and the materials and staff to run vocational training courses.



Photo: courtesy of AHF and Brian Rapsey

## Conclusions

It is essential that the focus of future policies and mechanisms that contribute to the empowerment and equality for girls and women of all ages must have gender-sensitive, human right-based approach and address the specific needs of vulnerable groups. Further concerted, sustained and accountable actions must be taken to close the gender gap and achieve the full realization of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The knowledge and perspectives that NGOs and civil society bring are essential in ensuring that no one is left behind in efforts to achieve the SDGs.

To achieve gender equality in and through education, the following actions and policies should be implemented:

- Implementation efforts should use gender mainstreaming approaches and principles, including gender budgeting and evaluation methodologies.
- Programmes and projects should be implemented in consultation with stakeholders and in response to their needs.
- Develop and introduce qualitative data measures.
- Promote and ensure the use of available technologies to increase access to quality education, particularly for women and girls living in vulnerable situations.
- Take action to include women in humanitarian action, to ensure the success of sustainable development.
- Ensure the existence and availability of accessible community-based safe spaces for inclusive, continuing and lifelong education.
- Establish effective, accountable and gender sensitive monitoring systems and promote capacity building, including the involvement of NGOs and civil society.

Author: F. Fletcher Williams

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<sup>i</sup> UNDP, Gender Inequality Index, 2018

<sup>ii</sup> World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report, 2020

<sup>iii</sup> UNDP, 2020 Human Development Perspectives, Tackling Social Norms: A game changer for gender inequalities

<sup>iv</sup> For statistics on the above please see: Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Report of the Secretary-General: Advance unedited Copy, 2020; Femicide Volume X11 JOINT STATEMENT ON INTERNATIONAL DAY ON THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN 25 November 2018

<sup>v</sup> Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Report of the Secretary-General: Advance unedited Copy, 2020. In particular see paragraphs 4, 13 and 16.

<sup>vi</sup> Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Report of the Secretary-General: Advance unedited Copy, 2020, paragraph 13