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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Soroptimist International, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 August 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



The human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation

Soroptimist International recognises that all States in determining that access to safe drinking water and sanitation should be seen as a human right, hope has been given to the many millions of people across the globe who have struggled without this safety net. In the current climate of a pandemic which is controlled by use of soap and water it is even more critical that this human right is available to all, especially women and girls.

Soroptimist International (SI) is a global volunteer movement of women, active for almost 100 years, with a network of over 75,000 club members in 122 countries. SI's mission is to transform the lives and status of women and girls and to accomplish this, members work at a local, national and international level to Educate, Empower and Enable opportunities for women and girls.

In 2019 it was reported to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly that 785 million people lacked even a basic drinking water service, 2 billion people lacked a basic sanitation service and 673 million people worldwide still practice open defecation, which is one of the clearest manifestations of poverty and extreme poverty. This is nearly 10 years after the recognition of this human right given to all and in spite of commitments by Governments to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6.

Women and girls often face, especially in humanitarian crises, including in times of conflict or natural disaster, particular barriers in accessing water and sanitation and they shoulder the main burden of collecting household water in many parts of the world, restricting their time for other activities, such as education and leisure, or for earning a livelihood. Women and girls are particularly at risk and exposed to attacks, sexual and gender-based violence, harassment and other threats to their safety while collecting household water and when accessing sanitation facilities outside their homes or practicing open defecation.

Lack of access to adequate water and sanitation services, including for menstrual hygiene management, especially in schools, contributes to reinforcing the widespread stigma associated with menstruation, negatively affecting gender equality and women's and girls' enjoyment of human rights, including the right to education and the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on women and girls throughout the world in all aspects of life, amplifying previous barriers for them to development and equality:

- Gender based violence has been reported from many countries as having increased, with many incidents related to women's responsibility for the collection of water or to their need to defecate in open spaces;
- Women's health services have been reduced in many places especially pre and post maternal care as all focus has been on treating coronavirus patients;
- Lack of water, sanitation, soap, menstrual products impose stronger challenges on women and girls than men. The provision of these items are vital to combatting the corona virus infection.
- Girls who have been out of school for a long period of time because of the closure of schools for COVID-19 are less likely to return than boys thus losing their education and future prospects;
- The care and home schooling of children out of school has fallen mainly on women/mothers;
- The majority of health and care workers are women and they have been placed at risk in the frontline;
- Women are not being included in the leadership and decision making on dealing with this pandemic, and are not included in the management of vital water and sanitation provision.
- Gender disaggregated data is not being collected for the impact of the virus on women and girls;

- All of the above is magnified when women and girls from disadvantaged groups are considered.

Reporting to the High Level Political Forum in July 2020 Léo Heller, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to water and sanitation drew attention to the fact that ten years after the UN explicitly recognised water and sanitation as a human right, billions of people still lack access to safe drinking water and sanitation. “The coronavirus pandemic has taught us that leaving behind the people most in need of water and sanitation services can lead to a humanitarian tragedy,” he said.

In 60 countries identified as having the highest risks of health and humanitarian crises due to COVID-19 three in four schools lacked basic handwashing services at the start of the pandemic. There is an urgent need to implement WASH protocols for the safe operation of schools as well as in households and health care facilities.

The WHO recommendation to wash hands frequently with soap and water highlights the lack of access to water and sanitation facilities in many countries. The restrictions on travel measures to prevent spread of the virus impacts heavily on women and girls when they need to reach farmed land, bring food to market (which leads to more food loss) or to access water for survival acting as caretakers for their families and communities. Water scarcity is also a driver for internal displacement and migration leading to female headed households as sole parent and care-taker.

The WASH in Health Care Facilities (HCF) Global Baseline Report in 2019 highlighted that one in four HCFs lacks basic water service (affecting more than 900 million people), one in five HCFs has no sanitation service (affecting about 1.5 billion people), and one in six HCFs has no hygiene service. Services should meet minimum quality standards and should be separated for infected versus non-infected patients. There is still a long way to go to meet these standards.

A recent Soroptimist International President’s Appeal project: Women, Water, Leadership (WW&L) provides women and girls with the opportunity to get the education and vocational training they need to be an equal partner to manage the most essential ingredients of life: water (water security for all), sanitation, food and energy.

The Women, Water and Leadership (W,W &L) project unites Soroptimists worldwide as a global voice for women to increase awareness of the vital role women play as equal partners at all levels of the water sector in a programme empowering women and girls to assume leadership positions in managing the water/food/energy nexus. Women and girls were given educational and vocational programmes to enhance their the capacity and experience they need to take leadership in managing water and sanitation.

Soroptimist International working together with Women for Water Partnership (WfWP), a worldwide network of 28 women organisations active in the field of gender, water and sanitation and sustainable development, successful projects have been put in place in 4 countries.

The ripple effect of WW&L resulted in the empowerment of an astonishing number of women who are becoming economically independent, are experts in their field, started businesses and provide a better life for their communities and families. The WeWASH programme in Bulgaria, for example, not only provided alternative sanitation facilities in a village but also trained the community in the need for safe water and sanitation, and helped skill up women to install and maintain these facilities. Work across countries in three continents demonstrates that the project is sustainable and can be replicated in all communities to the benefit of many.

Working in partnership around the world toward SDG 6 and other water related targets to enable access to clean water and good sanitation means that women have to be included in all aspects of project development and management. They are the major players in understanding the needs of their communities and can ensure that development is practical, appropriate, affordable and sustainable. This work in turn cuts across many other Sustainable Development Goals contributing to their achievement.

As women are always central when it comes to providing the necessities of life, it stands to reason that women actively contribute to the importance of water for all aspects of sustainable development including poverty and hunger eradication, water related disaster reduction, health, agriculture and rural development, hydropower, food security, gender equality as well as the achievement of environmental sustainability and protection. Water and sanitation have to be priorities in national processes, in particular national sustainable development and poverty reduction strategies.

Soroptimist International urges all governments, municipalities, businesses and industries to work towards the internationally agreed goals on integrated water resources management, access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation, agreed upon in Dublin, Beijing, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Agenda 21, the Millennium Declaration and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation.

We urge the Human Rights Council (HRC) to:

- to re-acknowledge the recommendations of the UN special rapporteur in his report in 2016 on gender and the human rights to water and sanitation
- request explicitly in the mandate for the new rapporteur on Human rights to water and sanitation to follow-up and look further at gender and women's participation aspects of the implementation of these human rights
- discuss with the CEDAW committee, that there will be targeted questions in their reports and evaluations, addressing the issue of access and safely managed water and sanitation and its gender-responsiveness and the possibility of a new general recommendation on this topic in close cooperation with HRC
- ensure in cooperation with UN Women and the Commission on the Status of Women bureau, that these aspects are part of the deliberations around Beijing25 investigating if a dedicated session can be held during the Summit on 1 October 2020 and/ or during the upcoming generation equality Forum
- strongly suggest that donors incorporate provisions for work on the ground by women's organisations especially when it comes to water and sanitation provision and training.

Soroptimist International urges local governments, utilities and the public sector to use participatory, gender balanced and gender sensitive working methods in developing sustainable, equitable and affordable water and sanitation systems and water treatment infrastructure. Women must be key actors in the decision-making, development, implementation and monitoring of these systems.

Soroptimist International will work together with governments, other non-governmental and voluntary organizations, UN agencies and other relevant bodies to increase public awareness of and advocacy for the need of safe drinking water and for all aspects of sustainable development and to take action where possible enabling the fulfilment of SDG 5 and SDG 6 ensuring the universal right to safe drinking water and sanitation for all.
