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Statement submitted by Soroptimist International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/2011/100.



Statement*

A school in India has 700 students and no running water. Without access to proper toilets and sanitation, many of the girls are forced to drop out. In New Zealand, adolescent girls attend schools every day where bullying destroys their self-esteem, confidence, and ability to learn. In some cases, girls turn to self-harm, including cutting and substance misuse. In Cameroon, high dropout rates leave generations of women without opportunity — with no basic literacy, math, or vocational skills, they are at high risk of extreme poverty. Sex work, unwanted pregnancies, homelessness, and isolation are daily realities.

Pinning the world's hopes for the future of women and girls on increasing enrolment rates alone obscures thousands of stories like these. An equal opportunity to learn in a safe space, free from violence, exploitation, and discrimination is no less a human right than the right to have one's name on an enrolment roster. Despite increasing enrolment rates in recent years and progress towards Goal 3, we live in a world where millions of women lack basic skills in reading, writing and numeracy in both the North and the South. Quality and range of education must be as much a priority as enrolment. Violence against women and girls, gender stereotypes, patriarchal systems, and the undervaluing of females create environments where girls cannot perform to their potential or may not be able to participate at all. These barriers remain a constant challenge throughout women's lifetimes. Most educational aid targets children and adolescents, leaving already vulnerable women without access to learning opportunities.

How can we ensure that girls can both enrol in school and achieve their full potential? How can we transform schools rife with violence, physical and non-physical, into safe spaces for learning? How can we improve the lives and status of the millions of adult women who were not afforded educational opportunities and are now past the traditional age for schooling?

We build toilets. We encourage partnerships. We create safe spaces for learning for women and girls of all ages. We talk to young girls and value, respect, and support their views. We reach out to marginalized women that society has overlooked. We begin a genuine dialogue and, together, address needs. And we see results.

Soroptimist International, a global voice for women and girls representing nearly 90,000 individuals from 124 countries and territories, ensures that women and girls are afforded opportunities to access education in safe, healthy, and equitable environments throughout their lifetime. We operate under a skills and confidence framework to improve educational outcomes while creating empowering opportunities. Across the globe, Soroptimists are running hundreds of successful local, national, and international projects supporting women and girls to achieve their fullest potential, providing the tools to transform lives. Our experiences illustrate both what works and what we still need to do.

The situations in India, New Zealand and Cameroon are not hopeless; on the contrary, they are easily remediable. Soroptimists in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and India teamed up to build six new toilets with proper sanitation facilities in a girls' school in Calcutta. The toilets have come as a great gain to the girls who are eager to complete their schooling now that there has

* The present statement is being issued without formal editing.

been a vast improvement in the health and sanitary conditions in the school environment. Absenteeism is almost non-existent.

Across New Zealand, Soroptimists are running workshops to educate girls on behavioural issues, bullying in text messages and cyberbullying, dating violence and fighting among girls: 225 girls, 45 parents and all teaching staff at a local school were involved in the pilot workshop which is now being replicated in other schools.

Soroptimists in Cameroon started an Adult Literacy Programme to cater for older women who were deprived of education, female dropouts, and street girls. Of the first intake of students, nine candidates were presented with the First School Leaving Certificate Examination run by the Government of Cameroon, and all nine candidates passed scoring 100 per cent. Nineteen pupils will be entered for the same exam in the programme's second year.

These solutions are not prohibitively expensive or time-consuming. They do not rely on complex policies or research studies. They do not need large powerful organizations with influence and authority to drive change. What they do need are local women and girls, working together, to identify ways to make schools safe, to reach out to marginalized women, and to understand the unique needs of different groups of women and girls. These solutions are simple yet effective, as long as the women and girls affected by the work are involved in the work. This focus on safe spaces for education, marginalized groups, and the importance of both formal and non-formal education across the life cycle improves the social and economic status of women and girls, above and beyond what we can achieve by increasing enrolment rates.

As we all know, investment in girls' education reduces female fertility rates, lowers infant and child mortality rates, increases women's labour force participation rates and earnings and fosters educational investment in children. All of these outcomes not only improve the quality of life, they also foster faster economic growth. There is no better way to uphold international commitments to women and girls than by empowering them with skills, confidence, choice, and opportunity. Education must be accessible, acceptable, available, and of good quality to women and girls, regardless of economic, social, political, or geographic contexts. Quality education for women and girls is achievable, sustainable, and beneficial to all.

With this in mind, Soroptimist International makes the following recommendations to the Economic and Social Council to meet the internationally agreed goals and commitments with regard to education to:

- Recognize that quality and range of education must be as much a priority as enrolment rates for women, girls, men, and boys — an equal opportunity to learn is no less a human right than the right to be enrolled in school.
- Ensure that women and girls, alongside men and boys, have accessible, acceptable, available, and good quality education, formal as well as non-formal. Awareness-raising programmes that inform girls of their rights and how to claim those rights must be widely implemented, as well as programmes that educate men, boys, families, educators, community, political and religious leaders.

- Ensure that girls are not at risk of violence, assault or abuse on their way to and from school, and that the school environment is not one where violence can easily occur.
 - Guarantee that all schools have gender and culturally sensitive sanitation facilities.
 - Strengthen legal frameworks and systems of justice, and where necessary, enact new laws to prevent, prosecute and punish all cases of violence that prevent girls and young women from participating in education.
 - Provide women and girls with equal access to complete secondary education, recognizing that the longer women remain in education, the greater the cumulative intergenerational benefits for their children as well as the economy and wider society.
 - Invest in policies and programmes which take a life-course approach to education, recognizing and understanding that access to learning is a human right at all ages, and that women and girls have different needs at different times in their lives.
 - Ensure that gender-disaggregated data is collected, analysed and acted upon in all above areas to promote future investment by society in the benefits of educating women and girls to society.
 - Take a human rights-based approach to education, bringing particular attention and focus to the participation of women and girls, as well as men and boys, in decision-making and policy-setting in a broad range of settings including both the public and private spheres.
 - Understand that education is more than traditional learning and classroom settings, but rather should take a holistic approach including the skills and confidence framework championed by Soroptimist International, available to women and girls of all ages.
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