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Statement submitted by Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland, 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 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Women's economic empowerment is a prerequisite for the Sustainable Development Goals to succeed. Achieving women's economic empowerment will only be achieved by sound public policies, a holistic approach and long-term commitment from all development actors.

Women and girls of all ages have been marginalised in their development through a variety of inequalities experienced solely through being female.

For the empowerment of women and girls to be realised through sustainable development a gender sensitive stand must be made across all 17 goals.

More equitable access to assets and services — land, water, technology, innovation and credit, banking and financial services — will strengthen women's rights, increase agricultural productivity, reduce hunger and promote economic growth. Women experience barriers in almost every aspect of work. Employment opportunities need to be improved. At the same time women perform the bulk of unpaid care work.

At a recent conference on women's issues held by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it was stated that "Women are the most underutilized economic asset in the world's economy." Only by correcting this situation through sweeping national, regional, and global institutional changes, and ensuring that women everywhere have the opportunity to become active economic agents, can we create stable prosperity, healthy societies, and a hopeful future. When more women work, economies grow. An increase in female labour force participation — or a reduction in the gap between women's and men's labour force participation — results in faster economic growth

Education and Training

The Empowerment of women in the changing world of work has to begin at ground level with access to education in all its forms. Without the fundamental tools to enter the workplace women are automatically excluded.

Equality can never be achieved if women and girls are excluded from education as they become automatically excluded from the workplace through lack of training.

It follows that this access to learning must continue throughout life to enable women to adapt their skills to a changing workplace. It is essential that education transcends all groups of women and girls particularly the most vulnerable groups including refugees and migrant workers, those with special needs older women and other minority groups.

Gender Pay Inequalities

It is unacceptable that equal work still does not bring equal pay. Globally, women are paid less than men and are penalised on pensions where they exist.

Women in most countries earn on average only 60 to 75 per cent of men's.

Contributing factors include the

- women are more likely to be wage workers and unpaid family workers.
- women are more likely to engage in low-productivity activities and to work in the informal sector, with less mobility to the formal sector than men.
- women are often seen as economic dependants.
- women are more likely to work in unorganised sectors or not represented in unions.

Women bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work and report care and other family and personal responsibilities as the reason for not being in the labour force. This directly and negatively impacts women's participation in the labour force.

The gender pay gap must be eradicated and action taken to ensure women have the same opportunities as men within the workplace. It is calculated that women could increase their income globally by up to 76 per cent if the employment participation gap and the wage gap between women and men were closed. This can be implemented by:

- Addressing gender stereotyping at all levels
- Ending discrimination against women within the workplace
- Providing access to care packages where required.
- Developing equal opportunities directives in all sectors.

Informal Employment

More women than men work in vulnerable, low-paid, or undervalued jobs. Approximately 49 per cent of the world's working women are in vulnerable employment, often unprotected by labour legislation. Women are far more likely to be in vulnerable employment in East Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific, South Asia, North Africa, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa and increasingly across Europe.

Employment with insecure work contracts such as those known as zero hours contracts are on the increase. It is essential that Governments should protect employees against this by ensuring such contracts are deemed illegal.

Legal Protection

Gender differences in laws affect both developing and developed economies, and women in all regions. Almost 90 per cent of 143 economies studied have at least one legal difference restricting women's economic opportunities and of those, 79 economies have laws that restrict the types of jobs that women can do.

In some countries male relatives can object to their women working and prevent them from accepting jobs in 15 economies.

It is imperative that legislation introduces policies that protect the right of women in employment to the same extent as they currently protect men. In addition,

a woman should have the choice and ability to enter into whichever employment she is trained for and wishes to pursue.

Women in Business

Companies greatly benefit from increasing leadership opportunities for women, which is shown to increase organisational effectiveness. It is estimated that companies with three or more women in senior management functions score higher in all dimensions of organizational effectiveness.

Women in Agriculture

Women comprise an average of 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, varying considerably across regions from 20 per cent or less in Latin America to 50 per cent or more in parts of Asia and Africa.

Despite the regional and subregional variation, women make an essential contribution to agriculture across the developing world.

Women farmers control less land than men, and also have limited access to inputs, seeds, credits, and extension services. Less than 20 per cent of landholders are women. Gender differences in access to land and credit affect the relative ability of female and male farmers and entrepreneurs to invest, operate to scale, and benefit from new economic opportunities.

Conclusion

Soroptimist International of Great Britain and Ireland congratulate the efforts being made by governments in addressing these issues but feel much is still to be achieved.

In order for no-one to be left behind in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals it must be realised that women and girls, through persistent under investment, comprise the majority of people living in poverty. They have neither the skills nor the rights to extricate themselves from this situation.

Women's Economic Empowerment in the changing world of Work must begin by ensuring equal access to education, equal training, equal pay for comparable work and deference given to the family constraint automatically placed on women as carers.

If the 2030 agenda is to be achieved it is essential that gender is included at all stages of consultation and policy development. This would promote the inclusion of women and girls as leaders or decision makers.