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to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly  
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and  
peace for the twenty-first century”**

**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 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

## **Statement**

This statement addresses women as leaders, decision makers and participants in public life and is presented by Soroptimist International on behalf of its 72,000 members active in 121 countries. Soroptimists are leaders in their communities and professions, working in partnership with women, girls, and their communities, to educate, empower, and enable. For almost 100 years, Soroptimists' grassroots projects have addressed discrimination and inequality experienced by women and girls. We actively support the achievement of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

United in achieving gender equality for all, Soroptimists work worldwide to elevate the position of women within society and the workplace, and equip girls and women of all ages with leadership skills enabling them to meet their full potential. Soroptimists recognise that social expectations, education, and the behaviour and attitudes of others, influence how women and girls can be leaders, decision makers and participants in public life.

The current UN Women Generation Equality campaign highlights the challenges still facing women and girls as they push forward to take on roles in leadership and decision making at all levels of life from family, through community to national and international positions. Building on the Beijing Declaration, Generation Equality aims for "equality in political leadership, corporate boardrooms and factory floors. Women have equal say in decisions that affect their lives, their

bodies, their policies, and their environment, from villages to cities.” Soroptimist International wholeheartedly supports those aims. This has to be the future for all young women and girls today.

Women’s full and effective participation in leadership, decision-making and public life is not limited to women in employment or in politics. From early childhood, girls can lead, be encouraged to lead, and learn leadership skills. This is essential to combat stereotypes and harmful traditions. We know that from the first years of their lives girls are given fewer opportunities, and are not actively encouraged to participate in activities that build leadership skills such as sports, debating and student government.

Families unable to pay for their daughter’s education may invest their limited resources in their sons because of discriminatory social attitudes. Rather than completing education, learning to be leaders and participating in public life, girls may be forced into child marriage leading to devastating impacts upon them, upon communities and for sustainable development. Their role in the family and community is predestined as carers and home makers.

Childhood experiences develop later attitudes regarding women participating in politics, pursuing career ambitions, becoming community leaders, or expressing views publicly. Role models and positive, encouraging action in early life will generate the leaders and decision makers of the future.

Regressive social attitudes and stereotypes promote behaviours that form fundamental barriers to sustainable development, gender equality, and the empowerment of women of all ages and girls. Socially constructed attitudes, expectations and actions set the trajectory for women's and girls' lives. It is proven that parents', teachers' and other adults' expectations, shape girls' behaviour and life outcomes.

In adulthood, women face multiple barriers to participating in public life, leadership and decision-making that constitute gender discrimination. The educational attainments and soft skills of men are valued more than those of women, demonstrated by the fact that in many countries women are more educationally and professionally qualified, but continue to earn less, are promoted less, and are notably statistically absent from higher levels in all employment sectors, especially STEAM.

Women with children often experience this discrimination more acutely, the assumption being that mothers cannot be as dedicated to their careers, with men not yet taking an equal share in childcare.

When violence and harassment occur within the workplace, finding 'resolution' is often left exclusively to managers or human resource departments. This reduces systemic problems to private, individual instances and prevents there being a full response across all of society. Many of these occurrences constitute crimes; by responding within the company, women are denied proper accountability and recourse.

The Beijing Declaration forms one of the founding documents for UN Security Resolution 1325 and those which follow. On its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary it is important to recall that the increase in the participation of women in conflict resolution at decision making levels and leadership in humanitarian crises has been slow to be implemented. Whilst there are many women willing and able to take part in discussions and negotiations their leadership roles in peace and security have gone unrecognised and unused. The current global situation of tension, crises and conflict in many areas makes it even more imperative for women to be engaged immediately.

These social phenomena have become magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly with women assuming the major role in care for the family and community. Under COVID -19 there has already been regression on gender equality. This regression will impact women, their families, communities and countries, making it harder to rebuild post-COVID and re-entrenching barriers to sustainable development and the achievement of the Beijing Platform for Action.

The Human Rights Commission has pointed out that women and girls, as well as women's organisations and networks, are not equally represented in local, national and global COVID policy spaces and decision making. Efforts should be made to ensure women's full and meaningful participation, representation and leadership in all aspects of dealing with the virus including plans for recovery. A diversity of women's voices should be heard and represented in public discussions and media broadcasts.

Women seeking to be decision-makers, leaders, and participants in public life face further challenges through sexist public vitriol, harassment, threats, and sexual and gender-based violence especially on-line. These actions can be committed anonymously online, target women, and particularly women who experience intersecting discrimination, to exclude and prevent them from participating in public life, leadership and decision-making. The scrutiny women face, in and outside of the public eye, is significantly different to that of men. Women in areas of work that attract the attention of the public eye — human rights defenders, politicians, journalists, activists, industry representatives, writers, artists and others — know simply excelling at their career carries risks of violence and sexist condemnation. Understandably, many decide these are experiences that they do not wish to have. When women choose not to participate in public life, leadership or decision-making, the loss of these women as leaders is a loss to society.

Many of the barriers to the progress of women and girls in leadership, decision making and public life generally already form part of the legal and regulatory system of many countries. However, there is still much that can be done:

- All states should ratify CEDAW and remove any reservations, implement UN Resolution 1325 and urgently ratify ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 106 on violence and harassment in the workplace.
- New laws, regulations and social justice programmes should be developed and implemented to respond to women's and girls' under-participation in leadership. These laws, regulations

and social justice programmes should include: guaranteeing equal pay; addressing harassment, violence and abuse women face online and offline; examining legal ideas of what constitutes a threat or threatening behaviour; requiring additional protection measures to be developed; and recognising that online presence is now part of participating in public life.

- National jurisdictions must upscale efforts to ensure legal standards are applied to online behaviour, and work with the digital technology sector to respond to online discrimination and harassment, including the development of national, regional and international regulation to ensure parity of standards to prevent online gender-based discrimination and secure the safety of women and girls when participating in public-life, leadership and decision-making.

To overcome the barriers to participating fully in public life, leadership and decision-making that girls and women of all ages experience, Soroptimist International urges Member States through education programmes:

- To provide continuous training for education professionals and those working with youth, to ensure they cultivate positive expectations for girls, facilitate girls' participation in leadership and develop their leadership skills to help overcome historical social attitudes which are fundamental barriers to women's and girls' participation in public life, leadership and decision-making.

- To ensure formal and informal education at all levels and for girls and women of all ages includes leadership skills and personal development to encourage the abilities of women and girls to be representatives and leaders at every level of society.
- To enable women and girls removed from school early to achieve educational milestones through expanded education and training programmes.
- To include measures to ensure women and girls participation in public life, leadership and decision-making in all sustainable development programmes and interventions.
- To develop and implement programmes working with men and boys to prevent future sexual and gender based discrimination and violence and encourage the redistribution of household responsibilities. This benefits men as well as women and results in a more inclusive sustainable and gender equal world.

We would further urge that:

- Governments, political parties, company boards, institutional leadership committees, and other organisations struggling to achieve gender equal recruitment and career progression should implement gender quotas to ensure women's equal participation in leadership. Quotas should be complemented by programmes to prevent future gender discrimination and harassment, and include policies that ensure employers and human resource departments will



work with the police to report crimes of violence and harassment where it is desired by the victim.

- All employers, including governments, the public and private sectors, sports leagues, NGOs, international organisations and others should ensure that staff receive training on gender equality and discrimination, and the essential role of women in leadership and decision making.

There is no need to wait for girls and young women to become adults before more women become visible. Girls and young women like Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg have proven that young women are capable and want to be seen, heard and transform the world they have inherited from the previous generations. Women and girls of all ages deserve a seat at the table in public life, leadership and decision making. Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. To make that a reality, all states, the private sector, civil society and NGOs, and other stakeholders must work in collaboration. Men must be included in the discussion. Only when women and girls of all ages are able to fully and equally participate in public life, hold positions of leadership, and be recognised key players at all levels of decision making, will the world we live in be one where everyone has equal opportunities, economies are more sustainable, and societies more inclusive and prosperous. Women enable a just, equitable and peaceful world.

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