

## **Soroptimist International CSW Statement Responding to the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change**

This statement is presented by Soroptimist International on behalf of its members active in 122 countries. This voice is strengthened by the organisations who have signed onto this statement.

Climate change poses an existential risk to human life. Women and girls already bear the brunt of immediate and long-lasting impacts of environmental degradation, natural disasters and changing climates. Societies must adjust to ensure sustainable human development which works in harmony with our environments, not exploit them to destruction. Economies and the world of work must adjust to limit irreversible climate change now. The grassroots projects and work of Soroptimists and the other organisations supporting this statement demonstrates the need to mainstream gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in climate action.

States and the UN have discussed the environment for decades, and a 'lack of political will' has been long cited as a reason for inaction. This must stop. There is now overwhelming evidence that climate change is causing irreversible damage faster than predicted. People are dying because of pollution, lack of food and water, disease spread, conflict due to resource shortages and natural disasters. Local and rural economies are becoming more unstable, further compounded by the covid-19 pandemic, leaving women and girls at an increased and disproportionate risk of poverty. Even if the Paris Climate Agreement targets are met, some countries will cease to exist, including small island developing states, leaving millions displaced and stateless.

We have to ask – what more is necessary to ensure the political will to act? Positive, cooperative and ambitious multilateralism can address these global challenges. We know the solutions to these problems. The public support given to civil society organisations, shows that the people have the will to make these changes. Now our leaders must do so too.

To achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes, women must be leaders and decision makers creating and implementing policies and programmes. Women and girls are agents of change; they understand how climate change impacts them, and they know how to solve these challenges. Rural and indigenous women in particular have been working for years to reverse environmental degradation, preserve natural and local resources, and bring about a more harmonious relationship with nature.

Sustainable approaches that address the interconnections between all three pillars of sustainable development – social, economic and environmental – and adopt a human rights-based approach best address climate change. These actions would be inclusive and gender-transformative, recognising gender considerations cannot be a programmatic 'add-on'. Working with, and channelling aid through women promotes effective and sustainable outcomes, for individuals, families and communities.

CSOs have repeatedly proven these approaches work. CSOs have long combated climate change and improved the quality of the environment, from historic projects like saving redwood trees a hundred years ago, to contemporary projects which simultaneously address women's poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and political- and ethnicity-related conflict. As the driving force of gender and climate action, together CSOs have amassed decades worth of evidence that shows programmes are most successful when using a cross-cutting approach. Climate change, gender equality and sustainable economies cannot be addressed in siloes. This evidence can and should be used by states to drive forward immediate action.

Together, the signatories of this statement highlight three key areas of action.

### ***Education and training***

Education and training is significant in protecting the environment and ensuring gender equality, as well as contributing to immediate and long-term responses to natural and human-made disasters. Environmental education must go beyond formal education settings to ensure all people can participate in reducing environmental degradation and mitigating local climate change impacts. Similarly, education and training contributes to system-wide change that ensures the world adapts so that it is resilient to climate impacts and takes immediate concrete action to limit and prevent climate change. Women's and girls' leadership has a vital role to play in this system-wide change. Programmes and actions must enable them to take on leadership roles in all environments and at all levels.

This must include recognising local, rural and indigenous women's expertise, on how to work gainfully and harmoniously with the environment. Education and training opportunities must be expanded and fully resourced, ensuring opportunities for women and girls throughout their life course, particularly so they can enter and participate in the green economy. In climate change and disaster contexts, women's and girls' education and training is disproportionately disrupted, especially when that education or training is informal. Older women, women in the justice system, and women who have experienced abusive labour conditions cannot be left behind. Regardless of age, all people have a right to education, to "catch up" on missed education, to fill gaps in their essential education and to retrain to sustainably maximise economic opportunities.

### ***The gendered impacts of climate change on armed conflict and humanitarian situations***

The impacts of climate change and environmental degradation can exacerbate or cause armed conflict. Similarly, conflict can also lead to environmental damage or destruction. The dual challenges of armed conflict and climate change disproportionately and negatively impact women and girls. It is well-known that women and girls experience sexual and gender-based violence, displacement, food insecurity and a lack of health services in conflict situations, and in conflict recovery face challenges in accessing education and economic opportunities.

These challenges can impact the environment if not approached using a gender-transformative and human rights-based approach. To address these challenges, women must be leaders and active, equal, full and meaningful participants in peace and reconciliation efforts. This must play a part in global efforts to decrease armed conflict to protect women, girls and the environment. Women in communities furthest from administrative centres are also those furthest from participation in decision making, particularly in conflicts, post-conflict areas, and all too frequently in humanitarian emergencies. Special attention must be paid to ensure the inclusion of rural women and those forgotten by all but those who would target them for violence.

### ***Right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment***

Climate change and gender inequality must be addressed simultaneously by recognising the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment through constitutions, legislation and regional and international treaties. Women and girls in all their diversity play a critical role in protecting their environments. The wider environmental context affects whether their human rights are realised. In contexts of climate change and disasters, women and girls must be able to pursue stable employment and education, be leaders, and their differentiated needs must be mainstreamed. Women's and environmental rights defenders must be protected, not targeted. Human rights norms must apply to environmental issues, as without a healthy environment it is impossible to realise human rights, including women's and girls' human rights.

The 'greening' of well-established human rights, including the rights to life, health, food, water, housing, culture, development, transport, property, and private life, has already contributed to improving health and wellbeing worldwide. The Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment should be supported in calling for the UN to formally recognise the right to a healthy environment. UN member states should act quickly to fill this gap in international human rights law that affects all women and girls.

### ***Recommendations***

Climate change, disasters and crises reveal and compound existing inequalities, including gender inequality. To move towards gender and climate justice, Soroptimist International and the organisations signatory to this statement recommend:

- That gender-transformative and human rights-based approaches are used across environmental, sustainability, and disaster risk reduction programmes in order to best support sustainable development, recovery and future resilience.
- Recognising and using the expertise of local, indigenous and rural women who know their local environments best.
- Increase efforts to partner with local CSOs who have on-the-ground knowledge of environmental and social needs. CSOs frequently hold a position of trust within communities, making them best-placed to enact sensitive projects and to work from the grassroots up.
- Improving living conditions and access to sustainable technologies, to ensure people can take action to preserve their environment, Environmental sustainability is closely

linked with people's resources and sustainable technologies have additional benefits, including health benefits.

- Reducing barriers to sustainable technologies and closing the gender technology divide, including through global cooperation and technology sharing and improving living conditions and access to sustainable technologies to ensure people can take action to preserve their environment.
- Improving resources to build community resilience and improve sustainable infrastructure.
- Expanding and enhancing economic opportunities for women and girls through well-planned programmes that respond to community needs. An environmental dimension should be built into economic programmes, particularly those targeted at the economic empowerment of women and girls.
- Elaborating on laws to protect women working in informal sectors. All International Labour Organisation member states should ratify Convention 190 as part of their gender equality efforts.
- Urgently making safe water, sanitation and hygiene facilities universally available, particularly in rural areas. International support must be increased to facilitate local action to achieve this in an environmentally sustainable way. Governments should incentivise environmentally friendly behaviour, but also to introduce effective penalties for practices that are proven to harm ecosystems and threaten our collective future.
- The human rights outcomes of sustainable development programmes should be used for monitoring and evaluation. Progress measured by both qualitative and quantitative measures for human rights must be used as a marker of success.
- Continuing to develop capacities for disaggregated data collection, interpretation and analysis, including creating new qualitative indicators. Understanding the quality of sustainable development activities is vital to assessing whether the Sustainable Development Goals and gender equality have been achieved.

Human action is changing the Earth's climate in unprecedented ways. Only human action can limit future climate change. Our recommendations are actions which must be taken now to benefit women, girls and the environment.

Time has run out. A lack of political will is no longer an excuse. States must act now to ensure the preservation of the planet and the realisation of human rights for all women and girls.