

Mariet Verhoef-Cohen President SI/Europe

Speech Nordic Soroptimist Meeting in Reykjavik

Transforming Lives - Empowering Women and Girls.... A fantastic topic for this Nordic Meeting in 2008. A meeting of professional and international women, supporting other women in their community, in their own country, or assisting fellow Soroptimist Sisters in less fortunate areas. Soroptimist International is a vibrant, dynamic organisation for today's professional and business women. Through international partnerships and a global network of members, Soroptimists inspire action and create opportunities to transform the lives of women and girls by advocating for equity and equality; creating safe and healthy environments; increasing access to education; developing leadership and practical skills for a sustainable future.

Today we will hear from experts, how women can develop these leadership skills, which will help them in their personal life as well as in their professional life. Furthermore we will have a lecture on how we can assure women's advancement in management, politics and decision making, which is vital for a sustainable future.

Our first Soroptimist Club was founded in Oakland USA in 1921 and don't you think it's fascinating that right from that start in 1921, Soroptimist International joins with women worldwide, to ensure the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women to achieve the empowerment of women through Awareness, Advocacy and Action. Today, 87 years later, as we move forward with the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (the MDGs), it is still an actuality, it is still necessary and important that we are fully committed to invest in policies and programmes that empower women and promote gender equality. In our SI document '*Where we Stand*' you will find the Soroptimist Position. This document was updated in April last and in it you will find the authorised publication of programme related statements representing the position of the membership worldwide on current topics of concern. Existing statements are updated and new statements added to reflect changes in global circumstances and issues. Revised or new statements will be available for download from the SI website and from our own SI/E Federation Headquarters.

The issue of the advancement of women's rights has also concerned the United Nations and this since the Organization's founding. That is why Kofi Annan said in 2006: "It is impossible to realize our UN goals while discriminating against half the human race". And Soroptimists, who have a consultative status at the UN, will join hands with the UN and will help to eventually achieve these equal rights. Women still face discrimination worldwide, almost every country in the world has laws that discriminate against women - even in the Western world this is the case - take for instance the issue of the Glass Ceiling that has not yet been tackled nor solved.

The Millennium Summit of 2000 reaffirmed gender equality and women's empowerment as development goals in themselves (MDG3) and underlined their importance as a means to achieve all of the other MDGs.

Drawing on a vision in which human development guide all policy-making and development, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supports national partners to accelerate their progress towards the MDGs by identifying and responding to the gender equality dimensions of its four inter-related Focus Areas: poverty reduction, democratic governance,

crisis prevention and recovery and environment and sustainable development, again these are programme areas that also our Soroptimist organisation embraces and supports.

'Gender mainstreaming' was defined by the United Nations as 'a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated (maintained). The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.'

The relative status of men and women; the interaction between gender and race, class and ethnicity and questions of rights, control, ownership, power and voice all have a critical impact on the success and sustainability of every development intervention. (*also our projects!!*)

In practice, gender mainstreaming means identifying gaps in gender equality. Despite good intentions and some real progress, the development community, UNDP included, is still falling short in delivering on its promises. Many of the problem areas were already identified after the Beijing Platform for Action (and this was in 1995, so 13 years ago). These areas include attention to gender equality; targeting not just 'soft' areas for gender mainstreaming (such as health and education), but also supposedly 'gender-neutral' areas, such as infrastructure development and economic policies; and strong political commitment and will.

We have achieved a lot, especially during the last 13 years after Beijing, but obviously NOT enough. How can women be empowered, how can they develop if we don't act against the common violence against women.

I was in New York during the UN CSW, the 52nd Commission on the Status of Women, where the Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon made an urgent call to world leaders, Member States, lawmakers, United Nations entities, civil society, the private sector, the media and individuals, so to all of us, to work together to end violence against women. Ban Ki Moon said: "Violence against women is never acceptable, never excusable and never tolerable." Statistics made it clear that it was "an issue that cannot wait". At least one in every three women was likely to be beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime, and the practice of prenatal sex selection meant that countless others were denied the right even to exist.

No country, culture or woman was immune, Ban Ki Moon said. Horrific crimes -- including rape, sexual violence and the abduction and sexual enslavement of women and children during times of armed conflict -- went unpunished, and perpetrators walked free. What's more, gender inequality thwarted progress towards achieving the millennium targets.

We need to campaign for them. Campaign for the women and girls who have the right to live free of violence, today and in the future. Campaign to stop the untold cost that violence against women inflicts on all humankind. The UN campaign will continue until 2015, which is to coincide with the target date for the Millennium Development Goals.

Statistics paint a horrifying picture of the social and health consequences of violence against women. For women aged 15 to 44 years, violence is a major cause of death and disability. In a 1994 study based on World Bank data about ten selected risk factors facing women in this age group, rape and domestic violence rated higher than cancer, car accidents, war and malaria. Studies have revealed increasing links between violence against women and HIV/AIDS. Women who have experienced violence are at a higher risk of HIV infection.

Not to speak of the economic cost of violence against women, which is considerable and costs billions of dollars. Violence against women impoverishes individuals, families and communities, reducing the economic development of each nation.

In our projects and action we make sure that women are involved in the decision-making, from top to bottom. We need to continue as women are most often the ones whose human rights are violated. Even nowadays, rape of women continues to be used as an instrument of armed conflict. Women and children make up a large majority of the world's refugees. And when women are excluded from the political process, they become even more vulnerable to abuse. It is time for us to say here in Reykjavik, and for all Soroptimists to hear, that it is no longer acceptable to discuss women's rights as separate from human rights. These abuses have continued because, for too long, the history of women has been a history of silence. But this is changing.

We are Soroptimists, professional women, who together are strong. Let us look at all our projects, be it for water, education, health or human rights, and consider within all of these projects the possibility for the empowerment of women, involve women in the decision making process. Let us continue to create a world in which every woman is treated with respect and dignity, every boy and girl is loved and cared for equally, and every family has the hope of a strong and sustainable future. That is the work before us as Soroptimists. That is the work before all of us who have a vision of the world we want to see -- for our children and our grandchildren.

We have to continue working for equality. It is still possible. We must move beyond recognition of problems to working together, to have the common efforts to build that common ground we hope to see so that everyone will benefit, that women's lives are transformed and the women and girls have equal rights, as stated in our mission.