



FAQ About the Soroptimist Mission

Why does the Soroptimist mission focus on improving the lives of women and girls?

Soroptimist means “best for women” and this is what the organization has tried to be since its founding in 1921. Soroptimist is a volunteer organization of business and professional women who strive to improve the lives of women and girls in local communities and throughout the world. This is the goal because women and girls need our help. Both men and women and girls and boys live in poverty, face discrimination and have to overcome obstacles. But, throughout history, in every country in the world, women and girls face additional obstacles and discrimination because of their gender. The facts are clear:

Women:

- One in three women will be beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in their lifetime.
- The numbers of women being infected with HIV/AIDS has been rising steadily and is now at 17.5 million.
- According to a recent report, of the 600,000-800,000 people trafficked across international borders annually, 80 percent are female.
- Women work two-thirds of the world’s working hours but earn only 10 percent of the world’s income, and own less than one percent of the world’s property.
- Of a total of 550 million working poor, 330 million (60 percent) are women.
- Worldwide women’s unpaid care giving is worth up to \$11 trillion annually.
- Two-thirds of the 880 million illiterate adults are women.
- Only 15 percent of parliamentary seats and 6 percent of cabinet posts are held by women.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, a woman faces a 1 in 13 chance of dying in childbirth. In Western Europe, the risk is 1 in 3,200.

Girls:

- Of the more than 110 million children not in school, approximately 60 percent are girls.
- By age 18, girls have received an average of 4.4 years less education than boys.
- In some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent girls have HIV rates up to five times higher than adolescent boys.
- Pregnancies and childbirth-related health problems take the lives of nearly 146,000 teenage girls each year.
- An estimated 450 million adult women in developing countries are stunted, a direct result of malnutrition in early life.
- Two million girls and women are subjected to female genital mutilation every year.

Children are also a vulnerable population. Why not focus on children instead of just girls?

It is true that children are a vulnerable population, often with little or no means to protect themselves. However girl-children face unique challenges and struggles. Gender discrimination often begins at a young age—in some cases even before birth—and continues through the life span. Girl children are devalued and discriminated against around the world.

Currently, more than 70 percent of the 1.2 billion people living in abject poverty—on less than \$1 a day—are women. For many, the cycle of poverty begins at a young age. In many cultures, girls are considered to have little or no value, and therefore poor families often opt not to educate their female children. Without an education, girls are less likely to find sustaining work at a living wage, and are more likely to remain poor throughout their lifetimes.

Because of the prevalence of gender discrimination, harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, early marriage, female infanticide and pre-natal sex selection are still widespread. Additionally, the devaluation of the girl-child leads to female children being sold into human bondage and sexual slavery by their parents. Girls also experience discrimination in food allocation and lack of access to health care, which results in a lower survival rates for girls.

Why not focus on women in their roles as mothers?

Being a mother is a critical role that women play. However, not all women become mothers, and it is important to recognize the variety of roles women play in society and the multitude of issues they face. We believe in helping ALL women and girls. The United Nations has two separate bodies to address women (UNIFEM) and children (UNICEF). UNICEF (and also the United Nations Population Fund) focuses on a woman's role as a mother. Soroptimist strives to assist women both in their roles as mothers and as individuals and we strive to help girls with their special needs

Soroptimist recognizes that mothers have very special needs. We also know that when Soroptimist helps a mother, we help her children and we recognize the importance of this. For example, clubs are encouraged to work with the children of domestic violence victims. By breaking the cycle of violence and teaching a child that violence is wrong, the number of victims of domestic violence will decrease in the future. In addition, single mothers living in poverty need support—not only for herself but also for her children.

But men and boys also play an important role in ending gender discrimination. Why not include men and boys in Soroptimist programs?

Men and boys play an important role in ending gender discrimination. Gender equality will not be achieved until societal attitudes about the value of women and girls change. Soroptimist fully supports the Beijing Platform for Action which calls on both governments and non-government organizations to educate women, men, girls and boys to work together to improve the status of women and girls and to encourage them to work towards mutual respect and equal partnerships.

Soroptimist believes that the best way to engage men and boys in the pursuit of gender equality is by including them in projects that directly benefit women and girls. Soroptimist does not believe that we will change attitudes by including men and boys as direct beneficiaries in Soroptimist programs or ignoring the specific obstacles faced by women and girls based solely on their gender. For example, a project to educate teenagers on dating violence and on healthy relationships benefits the girls (and future adult women) who will be treated with respect. Another example: Soroptimist fully supports addressing the demand side of prostitution and trafficking. Soroptimist believes that women and girls will continue to be held in sexual slavery until the demand for paid sex and the attitude that treating women and girls in this way is acceptable is addressed.

Besides helping women and girls, are there other reasons to have a focused mission that all clubs are working on?

Yes. In order for the organization to survive, it is essential that Soroptimist's mission and brand be embraced and duly promoted. Members, clubs, regions, leaders and staff must work together to reshape Soroptimist's brand as a focused, relevant and progressive organization ready and able to serve the world's women and girls. A strong brand will translate into Soroptimist's increased ability to provide service to women and girls; enhanced membership; increased donations; and improved public awareness—the four components of the Renaissance Campaign.

What is Soroptimist doing, as a whole, to improve the lives of women and girls?

Through federation programs and club projects, Soroptimist is making a positive and measurable difference in the lives of women and girls. Last year alone, more than 1,000 women received Women's Opportunity Awards. The awards, which totaled more than \$1 million, are cash grants given to women to improve their economic status by gaining additional skills, training and education that help women to rebuild their lives through improved employment opportunities. Since the program started, Soroptimist has helped more than 20,000 women and their families.

The Soroptimist Workplace Campaign to End Domestic Violence seeks to raise awareness about domestic violence as a workplace concern. Each year, Soroptimist promotes participation in an event on November 25 (the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.) Every year since 1997, club members distribute cards in the workplace that contain domestic violence hotline information. Clubs also create awareness and work to end domestic violence by directly supporting shelters, advocating for legal protections, and empowering abuse survivors to change their lives. Recently, clubs have begun a campaign to institute domestic violence policies in their workplaces as a way to raise awareness and assist victims.

The Soroptimist Club Grant for Women and Girls provides about \$175,000 annually in grants to clubs that are initiating or continuing innovative projects that benefit women and girls. Sample projects include providing job training and mentoring for domestic violence survivors; helping impoverished women develop income-generating skills; establishing health clinics for women and girls in developing nations; hosting forums on the sexual trafficking of women and girls; and teaching girls about careers in non-traditional fields.

These are just a few of the Soroptimist programs that improve the lives of women and girls. In addition, Soroptimist recognizes women and girls for their contributions to building a better world through the Making a Difference for Women Award and the Violet Richardson Award. Soroptimist helps women and girls rebuild their lives following disasters and acts of war through the Soroptimist Disaster Relief Fund. Furthermore, Soroptimists conduct a myriad of local projects that address the specific needs of women and girls in their communities. Together—through local and international projects, Soroptimist is working on the mission to improve the lives of women and girls.

To find out more about how these programs help women and girls each year, please see the annual Program Impact Report available in the program section of the member's area of the SIA website.