



# Education & Empowerment

*Opening doors for women and girls following the COVID-19 pandemic*



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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

Across the world, we continue to see hard-won progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals go backwards. Many challenges still face societies after the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in relation to education and gender equality. Women and girls have missed out on years of education and training, and gender gaps regarding employment and pay have continued to widen. Many will never return to education or work. Opportunities for women's work has shrunk, more women are living in poverty, gender-based violence has increased, as has child marriage, teen pregnancy, and maternal and infant mortality rates have increased. These are the challenges the projects shared in this report address. Over the coming years it is critical to extend educational opportunities to girls and women, including those which will enable them to gain employment, to become economically independent and leaders.

This report focuses on SDG4 on education, SDG5 on gender equality, and SDG17 on partnerships. The projects featured in this report have had to adapt to new circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic and have successfully mobilised partnerships for sustainable development. Being based in communities and comprised of community

members, CSOs are excellently placed to create strong partnerships and can effectively carry out activities that reach some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in society. During the pandemic, the number of people requiring this support has significantly increased.

It is not new to say that COVID-19 has revealed and entrenched the inequalities that exist in our world today. As ever, it will be impossible to overcome COVID-19 and achieve sustainable development without addressing these inequalities. These are words that organisations regret repeating, yet every year we do. This is more than simply a problem with "political will" — in reality, the cause of injustices and inequalities within countries and between countries is the direct result of deliberate and bad political choices, policies and laws. Once again, we call for action, unsure what more needs to happen for states to transform their promises into immediate and concrete action to support gender equality. COVID-19 may have set us back, but during this decade of action, with ambition, increased political will, and full, effective, equal and meaningful collaboration with all stakeholders, it is still possible to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

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### About Soroptimist International

Soroptimist International (SI) is a global women's organisation that actively contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals through empowering women in their local communities to create their own transformative change. Active in over 3,000 communities across

122 countries worldwide, SI contributes to the achievement of gender equality through its aim to 'Educate, Empower and Enable' all women and girls. Sharing SI's voice at the UN are Representatives in New York, Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi, Paris, Rome and Bangkok.

**To recover from COVID-19, it is vital to re-focus on education.** Despite significant investments in education women and girls are still left behind. Women and girls have missed out on education and training during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many will never return to education. From working with communities, we know that the realities of a lack of education hits hard. Poverty rates are increasing, and there is a regressive shift to traditional gender roles and caring responsibilities falling upon the shoulders of women and girls. Without significant effort hard-won progress on sustainable development will be lost. Too often, women and girls are only seen as recipients of education and training. However, they possess knowledge and experiences which make them agents of change and essential contributors to sustainable development. Women's and girls' leadership must therefore be used to find and develop sustainable solutions.

**Gender-based violence**, while always prevalent, has made a despicable resurgence during the COVID-19 pandemic to such a significant extent that it has been labelled a shadow epidemic. This violence committed against women and girls in all their multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination is

a violation of their human rights and must be dealt with, with the utmost urgency. The pandemic pushed many people to live their lives wholly within the home, and behind closed doors gender-based violence is quickly viewed as a 'private problem'. Gender-based violence cannot be considered a private problem, but a public problem created and facilitated by societal attitudes, permissive laws and policies, lack of access to justice and the subjugation of women and girls.

**Sustainable development** must place the interests of people and the planet at its core. In today's world, many decisions are being made and actions taken that prioritise power, military strength, and profits to the detriment of people. This must end. Soon it will be too late to make meaningful change to save the planet and achieve sustainable development. Now is the time to act. Women and girls have repeatedly proven to be successful agents of change: when they are the recipients of sustainable development programmes, they transform societies for the better. To build forward better from COVID-19 more women and girls should be enabled to lead, return to education, and work for the changes we need.

### CORE CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Review, change and establish laws and policies, ensuring that they take a gender transformative approach and contribute to the achievement of gender equality. This must include emergency policies and laws enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Expand opportunities to kick-start small and medium businesses, including through investments in lifelong learning, training and education, which facilitate women and girls to be financially independent and own economic resources.
- Pay particular attention to the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and violence faced by women and girls who are refugees and internally displaced persons and fully resource partnerships which support them.
- Eradicate all forms of gender-based violence, both in conflict and in peacetime and use education as a tool to change social attitudes and share information on sources for support, and by strengthening laws and accountability processes.
- Dedicate more resources, including financing, towards achieving gender equality and fully fund multistakeholder partnerships that recognise the expertise and existing work of civil society organisations.
- Use multiple forms of data, including qualitative data, to design, implement and assess the impact and success of gender equality programmes and projects.

## **CAMEROON**

### **Improving the Status of IDPs through Vocational Training**

- Worked with 30 girls to support them through vocational training over a 6-month period
- Funded vocational training at 30USD a month
- Worked in partnership with the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family, Schools and education institutions
- Enabled the girls participating to establish their own businesses and gain employment

## **UKRAINE and SURROUNDING COUNTRIES**

### **Humanitarian Relief and Support for Refugees**

- Over €300,000 raised for projects working directly with refugees, with €70,000 coming through the Disaster Recovery Fund.
- More than 9 projects initiated
- Over 10,000 refugees supported
- More than 100 Ukrainian women supported in learning the language of their new location

## **CAMBODIA**

### **SI President's Appeal 2021-2023 Opening Doors to a Bright Future**

- 1570 women and girls as participants
- Equipped 652 women with business training
- Provided 20 tuk-tuk taxis to ensure access to health services, including for maternal health services
- Developed a two-year curriculum
- In partnership with Cambodia Community Dream Organisation conducted 4 awareness campaigns and 2 public seminars
- 46 women and girls selected as mentors

## **PHILIPPINES**

### **Adopt a National Police Women's Desk**

- 28 year-long project
- Qualitative evidence collected by SI Philippines used to develop the project
- Created biennial conference for Police to enhance gender equality
- Established HOPE Centres to work with women and families affected by gender-based violence
- Supported 2020 relief operations with 70,000 USD raised



## **KENYA**

### **SI President's Appeal 2019-2021 The Road to Equality: Lugari Leadership Camp**

- Equipped girls with careers coaching, including in law and human rights, communications, medicine and journalism.
- 200 girls in attendance
- The building of a new resource centre, which including electricity access cost 10,000USD
- 25,000USD provided for travel, food and other costs
- 15 expert speakers and trainers

## **INDIA**

### **Educate to Change: STEM for Roots**

- Benefitted 500 students at a local school for underprivileged students; specifically children of first-generation non-native speakers of English.
- Developed an outdoor learning programme using a mobile laboratory.
- Employed two local science experts to conduct outdoor lessons.

## **MALAYSIA**

### **Teenage Survival Kit**

- Over 160 parents and carer participants and over 470 teenagers and young people.
- Used two focus groups and specialised surveys to gather information necessary to tailor the programme to the needs of participants.
- Doctors, lawyers, psychologists, a child advocate and other experts shared information on key issues.
- Worked in partnership with universities and CSOs.



# OPENING DOORS TO A BRIGHT FUTURE

SI PRESIDENTS APPEAL 2021 - 2023



*Opening Doors to a Bright Future expands marginalised women's and girls' access to education in safe, friendly, and stimulating environments. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many barriers to education that women and girls experience have been re-established, pushing back years of progress. Through projects in five different countries in different regions of the world, this SI President's Appeal supports gender equality by enabling women and girls to access information, resources and services they need to make the choices they want.*

**Project partner: Cambodia Community Dream Organisation**

In Siem Reap, a rural part of Cambodia, the project focuses on girls aged ten to fifteen and newly widowed women who now head households. The programme gives extensive help to girls needing to return to education and continued support to ensure they transition from primary to secondary school. For widows and women who head households, the programme provides training to ensure they become financially independent and psycho-social services that promotes positive decision-making, self-esteem, and human dignity. By partnering with Cambodia Community Dream Organisation (CCDO), identifying and recruiting women and girls who will benefit from the programme has been more effective.

CCDO has worked in Siem Reap since 2000, so has become a trusted local organisation who can role-out targeted programmes, like Education and

Learning in Cambodia quickly. To reach the furthest behind first, SI and CCDO worked closely with Commune Councils for Women and Children and village chiefs — this kind of partnership with local organisations and communities is essential to identify those who otherwise can fall through the cracks of development programming.

During the first three months, 1570 women and girls joined the programme from six different communities. For girls, an extensive system of scholarships and mentoring will help them return to education and transition from primary to secondary school. The girls who are part of the programme have not returned to school since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic because of caring responsibilities, household chores, and economic insecurity leading to child labour. Given the low rate of secondary education, especially among poorer rural communities, this is a critical target group and

## ACHIEVING SDG4:



- Getting more girls into and completing primary and secondary education (Target 4.1 & 4.5)
- Providing women with free high-quality vocational training (Target 4.2 & 4.5)
- Increasing the number of women and girls with financial literacy and skills to promote their economic opportunities (Target 4.4)
- Providing illiterate women with literacy education (Target 4.6)

a key intervention to benefit girls and contribute to the achievement of SDG4.

The programme has a comprehensive two-year curriculum which includes business skills, human rights, gender equality, leadership skills and health, including sexual and reproductive health. These training sessions were rotated around communities, and after recognising that many participants were illiterate, materials were redeveloped to be more visual and to use more of the local language. Higher illiteracy rates among women, particularly older women, was a clear and immediate challenge — this had been a significant barrier to these women participating in sustainable development and now that they've been identified a literacy course is being offered as part of the programme.

To support visibility and community support for the programme, twenty tuk-tuk taxis were used to access services, particularly for women and girls to access vaccinations and antenatal care. Working with Commune Councils for Women and Children has been particularly effective at expanding service provision.

To fully empower women and girls, communities must be supportive of gender equality. Frequently, too much responsibility is placed on the shoulders of individual women to transform their community. While women and girls are agents of change, organisations, men and boys also have a critical role to play in supporting gender equality.

Using a gender transformative approach, CCDO, as part of the SI President's Appeal, used their trusted position to conduct four campaigns and two public seminars focused on empowerment, human rights, and the availability of local advisory services. Looking forward, the project is to expand to a capacity of 2382 women and girls.



### **Context:**

Cambodia and its education system is still to fully recover from the 1975-79 genocide which saw schools destroyed and teachers killed. Only 87 of the 1009 teachers in higher education prior to the Khmer Rouge period survived.<sup>i</sup> After this horrific period, education in Cambodia had to be rebuilt and the impacts of the genocide continue to echo on. Today, nearly 89% of girls are enrolled in primary education, dropping to 52.5% at secondary level, and the lower family income, the more likely it is for a child to be out of school.<sup>ii</sup> Many older adolescent and adult Cambodians are in need of basic education, with 1.38 million girls and women over the age of 15 being illiterate.

## **Conclusions & Recommendations:**

- Expand SME opportunities to kick-start businesses, as rural women and women with fewer economic resources may possess the skills but not the finances to initiate their business.
- Further develop data collection to monitor whether and how all forms of education, including tertiary education and vocational training transforms into economic opportunity and improved income.
- Work with established CSOs and communities to identify marginalised groups, as this will most effectively reach the furthers behind first, and support communities in transforming social attitudes as part of sustainable development.
- Use existing programmes as a mechanism to identify those who are illiterate and integrate literacy and numeracy training into those programmes.
- Share public service information, including health information, in local language and through visual, image-based information to ensure all people, regardless of literacy level, access information and can make decisions.



*Vocational training is essential for empowering girls to start their own businesses or gain employment. By funding scholarships for thirty girls who are internally displaced persons, SI Yaounde has supported those girls being able to transform their lives, addressing increased risks of poverty, exploitation, and abuse.*

*Project partners: Prime Minister's Office, Ministeris of Women, Basic Education and Secondary Education.*

Internally displaced girls face significant risks of poverty, violence, exploitation, and abuse. To address these risks and to empower girls approaching adulthood, SI Yaounde sponsored 30 girls through vocational training. The girls chose whether to pursue training in decoration, catering, hairdressing, make-up artistry, sewing, secretarial skills or management, with a view to being able to establish a future business or gain employment.

The project has been extremely successful in securing employment for the young women who receive training. 100% of those who participate have secured jobs or started businesses; of the 30 girls trained by SI Yaounde, twenty-one formed their own businesses and nine were employed. This demonstrates the abilities and desire of women to

be able to contribute to their economies, be financially independent and to develop the skills of other women and girls.



For example, two of the girls joined forces to open their own beauty salon, two who learnt sewing gained work with their trainer and are now training other girls, and five who learnt catering have

## ACHIEVING SDGs 4, 5 & 17:



- Using scholarships to promote access to high-quality vocational training to women and girls in vulnerable situations, ensuring that participants have relevant vocation skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship (target 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 & 4.b)
- Supporting women and girls to become leaders and economic decision-makers (target 5.5)
- By providing alternative economic opportunities, combatting gender-based violence by reducing risks of trafficking and other forms of exploitation (target 5.2)
- Using multistakeholder partnerships to mobilise resources and sharing knowledge for sustainable development (target 17.16)



opened their own event catering businesses and also train other girls in the process. This provides further evidence that supporting women and girls to expand their skills does not only help them as individuals but supports communities more broadly; women and girls are more likely to use their experience and resources to help others and to feed that back into societies and economies.



To maximise the scholarships they were funding, SI Yaounde negotiated with the trainers to gain a discounted rate. Their success in this was in part down to the good will of the trainers who were happy to support the empowerment of the girls.

This ensured that the 5000 USD funding SI Yaounde received from government ministries could go further. (2000 USD was received from the Prime Minister's Office, 700 USD from the Ministry of Secondary Education, 500 USD from the Ministry of Basic Education, 600 USD from the Minister of Women's Empowerment and 1200 USD from other sources.)

### **Context:**

Internally displaced people often exist in legal limbo. Without refugee status (due to not having left their home country) they are not afforded proper legal protection. Frequently, internally displaced people find themselves homeless, at heightened risks of poverty, inability to access services, and trafficking and exploitation. As always in conflict and complex situations, women and girls are disproportionately affected. During 2021, alongside the COVID-19 pandemic, Cameroon has faced mounting violence. Conflict over natural resources in the far north, violence in the north-west and south-west regions and climate change related events including floods and droughts has caused population movement of almost 2 million people.<sup>iii</sup> In addition to internally displaced persons, Cameroon hosts nearly 500,000 refugees from the Central African Republic and Nigeria.

## **Conclusions & Recommendations:**

- Women and girls in all their diversity must be guaranteed equal access to education throughout the life course. To ensure this, women and girls must have equal access to electricity, internet, digital technology devices, and digital literacy training; education spaces, be they physical or virtual, must be safe spaces; all education costs, be they direct or hidden costs, must be reduced or removed to ensure accessibility to education throughout their life course.
- Efforts must be made to improve the responsiveness of education systems to the changing needs of communities. Pandemics, climate change, migration, economic changes and other global impacts effect access to education. Monitoring of accessibility and ongoing adaptability in the education sector is key to equality and inclusivity.
- Embrace gender mainstreaming across all aspects of education and training. Gender mainstreaming should include the institutional measures of gender budgeting and financing for development, supporting and targeting women-specific policies and programmes that address gender discrimination and its impact in education.
- Enable civil society organisations to undertake activities and provide services which support the most disadvantaged by providing resources for them to carry out this work on the ground especially during the periods of greatest stress on public services.



## INDIA

### Educate to Change: STEM for Roots

*Located in India, SI Pune Metro East (SIPME) initiated the 'Educate to Change: STEM for Roots' project in response to classroom closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project addresses women's and girls' unequal access to education, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Partnering with Smiles Wellness Foundation and Horizon and drawing on the scientific expertise and leadership skills of Soroptimist club members, SIPME developed an outdoor learning programme using a creatively developed mobile laboratory. Rather than meeting indoors, or in a virtual space, students were invited to attend live science experiments in the open air, and subsequently taught how to conduct their own experiments.*

To challenge the educational and digital divide faced by students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, SI Pune created an 'under the sky' mobile laboratory which could be used in open spaces. This laboratory would allow students to conduct experiments themselves using a student-led approach, cultivating their curiosity and supporting their engagement with science.

In the initial phase of the programme, SI Pune Metro East conducted a 'prior knowledge' survey, with questions relating to ten scientific experiments that would follow. The students were invited to perform these ten experiments for themselves, and the survey was repeated afterwards. Student progress charts, maintained throughout the programme, reveal that each participant made significant

progress in scientific understanding. The heuristic learning method benefitted the students as they were able to gain a more thorough understanding of key concepts, while videos were shown to explain further technical details. The adaptation to an open-air classroom, rather than a virtual classroom, reconnected the students to academic opportunities, broadened their knowledge and increased their confidence.

Access to high-quality education and training throughout the life course transforms lives and communities. The cross-cutting benefits of education on sustainable development, and the fundamental role it plays in the achievement of gender equality is recognised globally by Sustainable Development Goal 4. Educating women

## ACHIEVING SDG4:



- Eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations (Target 4.5).
- Building and upgrading education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all (Target 4a).

*“I want to become a climate change scientist. Science is fun and I will grow up to follow my dream.”*

*– student participant*

and girls produces better health outcomes, fuels economic growth, and ensures stable and peaceful societies. During COVID-19, many students missed valuable years of education, putting their individual development, and sustainable development, backwards. By creating an open air laboratory, SI Pune Metro East was able to ensure students could still participate in education, allowing them to conduct their experiments in a socially distanced way, and by using technology to share information



### Context:

Since its outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused 1.5 million<sup>iv</sup> schools across India to close, while others remained open by relying on the use of virtual classrooms. Pre-COVID, only 24% of households in India had access to the internet<sup>v</sup>. Consequently, the rapid move toward virtual education platforms has magnified pre-existing inequalities across the education sector. The United Nations has recognised that the digital divide is more pronounced among underprivileged communities, and even greater between genders due to cultural practices which favour boys. Many students in vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, such as those living in remote areas, extreme poverty, fragile states and refugee camps, lack access to computers and the internet, and possess a lower level of computer-related skills, putting many already marginalised students at a further disadvantage. Left unchallenged, the digital divide will widen existing education gaps, and obstruct sustainable development.

### Conclusions & Recommendations:

- Women and girls in all their diversity must be guaranteed equal access to education throughout the life course. To ensure this, women and girls must have equal access to electricity, internet, digital technology devices, and digital literacy training; education spaces, be they physical or virtual, must be safe spaces; all education costs, be they direct or hidden costs, must be reduced or removed to ensure accessibility to education throughout their life course.
- Efforts must be made to improve the responsiveness of education systems to the changing needs of communities. Pandemics, climate change, migration, economic changes and other global impacts effect access to education. Monitoring of accessibility and ongoing adaptability in the education sector is key to equality and inclusivity.
- Embrace gender mainstreaming across all aspects of education and training. Gender mainstreaming should include the institutional measures of gender budgeting and financing for development, supporting and targeting women-specific policies and programmes that address gender discrimination and its impact in education.
- Enable civil society organisations to undertake activities and provide services which support the most disadvantaged by providing resources for them to carry out this work on the ground especially during the periods of greatest stress on public services.



## KENYA

### The Road to Equality: Update



*The Road to Equality combined education, training and awareness raising to empower women and girls to be agents of change, both in their own lives and in their wider communities. It addressed key gender-based issues, including violence, female genital cutting, the rights of older women, migration and trafficking, and child, early and forced marriage. In Kenya, The Lugari Youth Leadership and Mentoring Camp for girls aged 14-16 was supported by the appeal. In collaboration with the Willing Hearts International Society Canada and the Lugari Community Resource Centre, The SI President's Appeal provided 25,000 USD for the creation of a new Community Resource Centre, providing a safe place for girls during and in the wake of COVID-19, and for the 2021 Leadership and Mentoring Camp. A key component of Leadership Academy requires graduates to design and implement a project in their own community.*

### Lugari Youth Leadership and Mentoring Camp

COVID-19 prevented the Lugari Leadership and Mentoring Camp from going ahead in 2020. With this delay, the Road to Equality Appeal made this an opportunity to direct funds to build a new Community Resource Centre that will provide a more conducive environment for the training young future leaders. By taking the opportunities of programme delays, it was possible to support expanding the Leadership and Mentoring Camp's facilities to provide a permanent safe place for future programs. The first Leadership Camp since the beginning of COVID-19 was held September 30<sup>th</sup>

– October 6<sup>th</sup> 2021, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the leadership camp programme. The Leadership Camp brought together different expert speakers, many of whom mentor and work with the girls after the camp, supporting intergenerational exchange.

Sessions at this camp included leadership skills, agricultural training, debates about whether to abolish doweries, project design and management, sexual health and relationships, financial education, and disease awareness. These sessions focused on personal development, but also on skills which can



### ACHIEVING SDGs 4 & 5:

- Providing non-formal training and education to equip girls with skills that will support employment and continuing education (targets 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 5.5)
- Educating girls about sustainable development, and supporting the achievement of peace, human rights and gender equality in the community (target 4.7, 5.2)
- Building an inclusive learning environment (target 4.a)
- Contributing to ending gender inequality by providing girls with new and unique opportunities (Target 5.1)

transform communities. Many of the girls attending the camp already reported challenges in their communities that they wanted to change, and with these newfound abilities they would be able to be agents of change, social innovators and global citizens. Through activities like debating, the girls were able to critically engage with social ideas, and analyse the causes, impacts and values of social phenomenon. These abilities have life-long relevance, enabling the girls to engage in politics, leadership, and sustainable development more broadly.

Eradicating violence and promoting good health were significant topics of discussion in this camp. Both of these issues have been prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic, with women and girls

facing a ‘shadow epidemic’ of violence and discrimination. A police representative, lawyer, doctor and others factually explained procedures available to support the girls if they were to face violence, how to report it, and how to identify people who could be experiencing trauma and the support available to them. Many of these professionals also shared their personal perspectives and motivations to help women and girls, inspiring those at the camp to use their own passions to better the services women and girls receive. The girls attending also had their own view and expressed a keen interest in gender equality — coming from households where men have multiple wives, they had their own views on how “women’s roles” should change.

#### **Examples: What the Girls Will Do Next:**

*As part of the programme, graduates from the Leadership Academy are expected to design and implement their own project in their community, using the skills they have learned by attending the Academy. This increases self-confidence and helps demonstrate how girls can be agents of change, supports knowledge exchange, and furthers women’s and girls’ roles in leadership positions. These are some examples of what the girls who have most recently participated plan to do when they return to their own communities:*

**Blessings & Christine** are returning to their respective schools with the knowledge of how to establish a peer learning and support group.

**Angel & Flora** will return to their home of Baringo County and start their own agricultural training and tree planting project. They also want to use their prize-winning project proposal to work with local authorities to build more boreholes.

**Diana** produced a detailed plan to support marginalised children in her community of Musembe by building an orphanage before going forward to qualify a human rights lawyer.

## **Conclusions & Recommendations:**

- Girls must be recognised as agents of change, and be empowered to contribute to society and create the world that they want to live in. The girls of today will be those who will live with the consequences of climate change, political inaction and other sustainable development issues. Their views and voices must be heard and given maximum consideration.
- Local and national authorities must undertake action to consult more with girls and respond to the information they obtain from initiatives such as youth assemblies, leadership camps, citizens’ assemblies and focus groups.
- Schools and educational institutions must adapt lessons and curriculums to include global citizenship education, environmental education and leadership skills that will empower women and girls. These institutions should also undertake gender analyses to ensure that women and men, girls and boys, do not have different experiences in the education system, including in the development of ‘soft skills’ which have a life-long impact.



# WELCOME TO SICB Teenage Survival Kit



*The Teenage Survival Kit is an education programme that educates parents, carers, youth, and teenagers on contemporary issues relating to sexual and mental health, relationships and online safety. Using a syllabus developed based on information gained through focus groups comprised of young people, and with the support of experts, the programme provides information on how young people can cope with the challenges they face, particularly those that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic or are taboo subjects.*

*Project partners: HELP University, The Empowerment Group (an NGO), Sathya Sai International Organization Malaysia, Foundation Rolf Schnyder, Monash University Psychology Department, University TAR and Malaysian Institute of Arts.*

Using data gathered through focus groups and surveys conducted by SI Bangsar, they identified key issues of concern, including the need for sex, relationship and reproductive health education, mental health challenges including depression, stress and anxiety, and online safety.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools closed in Malaysia, and children and young people had to

transition to a virtual world. This greatly affected the formative educational and social opportunities available to them, putting them at greater risk of abuse, violence, including online violence, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS and pregnancy. These risks are further compounded because these are taboo topics in Malaysian multicultural society.

Parents and caregivers often find it difficult to talk about relationships and sexual health with their children. SI Bangsar's own survey evidence showed that only 56% of parents are comfortable having these discussions with their children and that teachers often skip aspects of the school curriculum, including issues of violence and rape.



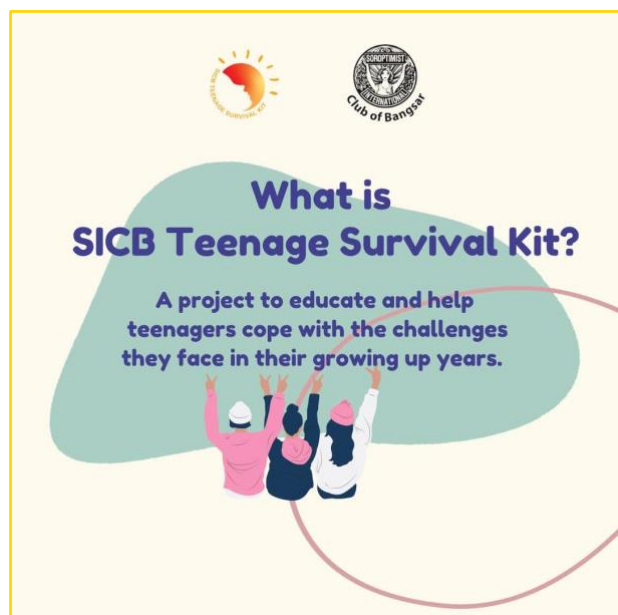
## ACHIEVING SDGs 4, 5 & 17:

- Conducting education which leads to effective learning outcomes (target 4.1)
- Ensuring all learners have the knowledge to support sustainable development, including the achievement of human rights and gender equality (target 4.7)
- Creating learning environments during COVID-19 that are safe and inclusive (target 4.a)
- Ending discrimination and violence, particularly cyber violence, against women and girls (target 5.1 and 5.2)
- Improving access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights through education programmes (target 5.6)
- Sharing knowledge and expertise to enhance the achievement of the SDGs through civil society and academic partnerships (target 17.16 and 17.17)

Parents are often aware of the risks their children face, but feel ill-equipped to deal with them.

Among the teenagers and young adults surveyed, 27% of them had engaged in sexual activity, with nearly half of those having had more than one sexual partner and over 70% getting information on sexual health from the internet. This survey evidence, along with qualitative data gathered by the focus groups corroborated that these issues were taboo, and highlighted that many young people are getting their information from unreliable and unchecked sources. To promote the SDGs on education, gender equality, and health, there is a clear need to empower and educate parents as well as young people so they can make informed life choices.

To support parents, carers and teenagers, SI Bangsar ran a series of webinars. While initially it was hoped to conduct the sessions in person, the COVID-19 pandemic made that an impossibility. However, by conducting the sessions online, it was possible to improve access to information for rural families and for girls living in social care institutions. Parents, carers, and teenagers who attended, reported that the sessions were extremely informative, with 85% saying they would recommend them to others. Other participants highlighted that the programme was a good way to open up the possibility of discussion, and the safe space it created for young people to ask questions emphasised what they need to know and learn.



Taking an innovative approach, SI Bangsar has treated teenagers and youth as stakeholders in the development and implementation of their programme from the start. Both focus groups were comprised of young people, and this allowed SI Bangsar to focus on approaches which would best engage teenagers. One of the ways SI Bangsar did this was to have a short video competition open to youth aged 15 to 25. Entrants created an informative video on one of the Teenage Survival Kit module subjects – teen sexuality, teen health, teen safety and teen empowerment. These videos, made by and for young people, will become publicly available through social media platforms.

## Conclusions & Recommendations:

- Online forms of education should be used to equip parents and carers with critical information they need to support their children. Online education also has the capacity to increase access to information for those living in rural areas.
- Safe, inclusive and judgement free spaces must be created so children and young people can ask questions to further their education.
- Children and young people must be considered stakeholders in their education to optimise educational outcomes.
- All sexual and reproductive health education must include information on gender equality, gender-based violence, and healthy relationships, which is age-appropriate and highlights the critical role of men and boys in achieving gender-equality and eradicating violence.

## PHILIPPINES

### Adopt a National Police Women's Desk



*For over 28 years, Soroptimist clubs have sponsored Women's Desks in police stations. To further women's leadership in the police force, Soroptimists have worked with senior police officers, policewomen and other CSOs to provide education and training, including in gender-sensitivity. Over time, the project has expanded, with a biennial conference, public awareness sessions, and support to women's refuges. Recently, the police-CSO network the project has created was used to respond to natural disasters during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring 50,000 women, girls and their families have received emergency relief. This adaptability and ability to protect marginalised women and girls has developed over time, demonstrating the importance of long-term programming and partnerships.*

The Adopt a Philippines National Police Women's Desk Project is currently a 28 year-long project, and has supported the Philippines National Police to develop its abilities to protect women and girls against violence and discrimination. Over this period, Women and Children Protection Desks have been created in every police station due to a 1992 Presidential Decree which created the National Police Women's Desks.

Responding to this decree, SI Makati collected evidence that policewomen were concerned about the disproportionate amount of administrative work they were being allocated by their male senior officers through interviews conducted with women police officers. The gender disparity in how police work was allocated directly impacted opportunities for promotion, and created a situation where women were not able to develop their skills to

undertake other aspects of police work. This suggested that the underlying action needed to make the Women's Desks effective had not happened; at this time, there was no Philippines National Police budget for gender and development. This led to the 'Adopt a PNP Women's Desk' project in 1994. All Soroptimist Clubs were mandated to support Women's Desks. In total, 33 desks were adopted, and education and training activities were carried out in multiple Philippine regions.

Soroptimists have developed education and training activities with the support of other civil society organisations such as the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW), Kalikasan, and other experts. With the expansion of the project, more CSOs have gotten involved to create a network of supportive organisations. This network



#### ACHIEVING SDGs 4, 5 & 17:

- Ensuring police, and particularly policewomen, have access to training and skills development (targets 4.3, 4.4 4.5 and 4.b)
- Challenging and addressing gender-based discrimination in the police and supporting the promotion of women within the jm, aimed at improving women's leadership within the police force and ending gender-based violence and discrimination in the community (target 5.c)
- Creating a public-CSO partnership and multistakeholder network which included monitoring and accountability processes (target 17.16 and 17.17)

can quickly identify new challenges and respond to them ensuring that the those in need of support can be reached quickly.

SI Clubs have also established HOPE Centres that work with women and families who have been affected by domestic and gender-based violence, and with girls who have been abandoned, demonstrating how the project has adapted over time. In addition to providing safe accommodation, these centres provide opportunities for women and girls to access psycho-social support, education, and skills training.

Women now in command posts in mainstream policework have been participants in the project. Having worked closely with the police, SI clubs in the Philippines are able to run collaborative awareness seminars with women police officers informing women and girls about their rights, and specifically how they can seek protection through the police and the legal remedies available to them. Issues addressed through these seminars include violence against women and children (covered by Republic Act 9262), child abuse, exploitation, and discrimination (Republic Act 7610) and human trafficking (Republic Act 9208).

### **Adapting to COVID-19**

During the pandemic, the project was able to reach more than 1000 attendees regarding the gender-based challenges the pandemic caused. Webinars on stress management and how to overcome anxiety and depression were carried out in 2021.

Through this training the multifaceted pressures experienced by women specifically were addressed.

### **Putting Laws into Practice**

While the Presidential Decree creating women's desks was important and necessary, for such decrees or laws to be effective, they require consistent and prolonged implementation to get the best results. Working with those most affected by these decrees is essential to ensure implementation is effective. Knowledge, resources, planning and implementation support will be necessary to achieve the aims of laws and policies aimed at achieving gender equality.

Typhoons Goni and Vamco (known as Rolly and Ulysses respectively in the Philippines) both hit in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, creating a double disaster. Through the police-CSO network created by the Adopt a Women's Desk Project, SI became involved in relief operations, with over 50 SI clubs raising 70,000 USD, benefitting 50,000 women, girls and their families in 12 districts. The pandemic, especially in combination with natural disasters, puts women and girls at risk of heightened discrimination and violence. Existing projects addressing gender-based sustainable development challenges are well-placed to respond quickly and effectively to women and girls, and particularly those who are marginalised.

## **Conclusions & Recommendations:**

- Ensure all staff in the justice system, including police, lawyers, the judiciary, and other relevant staff participate in effective gender-transformative approaches and monitor the impacts of that training. Senior staff who are in control of implementing policies and accountability systems should be given priority in receiving this training.
- Longer-term programming needs to be provisioned to minimise the need for "emergency" projects created in response to acute need. These projects can promote resilience, ensure successful community response, and be more adaptable to challenges.
- Put appropriate resources in place to enact laws and policies aimed at eradicating gender inequality, acknowledging that merely putting a law or policy in writing is not enough to make it become a reality.
- Use a gender-transformative approach across policies and programmes to challenge and change the impacts of gender stereotypes upon women in the world of work.



## UKRAINE & SURROUNDING COUNTRIES

### Humanitarian Relief and Support for Refugees

*Following the escalation of Russo-Ukrainian war on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022, Soroptimists across the world rallied to help those in Europe supporting the millions of refugees who fled the conflict. Through Project Matching Tool and the Disaster Recovery Fund resources are collected and distributed to Soroptimist projects in Europe. Through the global Soroptimist network over €300,000 has been raised so far directly to the projects within the War Zone initiative. The collection of cash donations, through approaches like the Disaster Recovery Fund, is critical in allowing those on-the-ground to funnel resources to where they are needed most.*

With over 6.6 million people needing quick support, Soroptimist Clubs in Europe leapt into action, starting projects in Ukraine itself, Poland, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary and Portugal, among others.

In Uzhhorod Ukraine, Soroptimists cared for many Ukrainians making the difficult decision to leave their country. With a steady stream of refugees, Soroptimists in Uzhhorod provide shelter, food and essentials to their fellow Ukrainians before the cross the border into Slovakia. Some have had refugees staying in their own houses. As well as hosting refugees, a shelter is being established for women and children fleeing the conflict, as many internally displaced people have gone to the west of Ukraine as a place of relative safety. This work was done in

partnership with Nehemia, an organisation SI Uzhhorod worked with in 2014. Using the global SI network, SI Uzhhorod has raised funds and used them to buy provisions including mattresses, bedding, medication, and hygiene products.

In Poland, Soroptimists across the country have mobilised to support the millions of refugees who have arrived. SI Gdynia is currently running a nine-week Polish course for Ukrainian women funded through project matching. Being able to communicate in Polish will help women arriving in Poland to settle, find work, access services and rebuild their lives.

SI Wroslava has also organised language courses, so far benefitting over 100 women, as well as



SDG 4

Education empowers women & girls where they now call home.



SDG 5

Providing women & girls with safe places, and protecting them from violence.



SDG 17

Mobilising a global civil society network



meetings with a psychologist to provide trauma counselling, and a career counsellor. Similar language courses have also been started in Romania, with SI clubs in Brasov, Slatina, Craiova, Bucuresti, and Tirgoviste all supporting refugees with learning Romanian.

SI Gdynia, in Poland, has also provided packages with essential items, including hygiene products and clothes to different locations across Poland, such as Pucka, Władysławów, and Trójmiasto.

SI Katowice (Poland) in collaboration with SI Haan (Germany) sourced and donated requested cardiology equipment and medical supplies to a cardiology unit in Kyiv. The goods arrived in an ambulance, also a donated gift.

These are only a few of the projects happening in Poland, but they are representative of the rapid humanitarian action which is reaching women and girls in the warzone, on the move, and when they arrive at their destinations. Projects in Poland have provided food, essential items, help in finding accommodation, access to psychological and legal assistance, and funded interpreters and translators.

In Moldova, SI Edinet assisted four refugee centres by providing necessary equipment for the day-to-day functioning of the centre, including washing machines, dryers, bunk beds and bedding. With over 4000 refugees currently receiving assistance through the centres, and with more coming, SI Edinet is continuing their support of the centres. This level of support far outstrips the initial 500 people that the club set out to support. Refugees have also been welcomed at the border by SI Edinet, with over 5000 receiving hot food and drink, 1000 have been given transport to Edinet district from the border crossing points, and 50 families have received support to settle in Edinet.

### **Civil Society Organisations working in Warzones:**

Already present on the ground, CSOs represent key stakeholders who are able to quickly mobilise, using their own existing networks to distribute aid and identify vulnerable individuals and groups. Despite the proven efficacy of CSOs, particularly in regards to working with women and in the areas of gender equality and women, peace and security, they struggle to access funding revenues or to be



*“we are going through the most terrible days and nights in Ukraine ... we feel helpless that so many innocent people are suffering and dying again ... we do not know how the next night will go ... I myself shared my room with women from war zones in the East. This time there are many. And they ask for help and need support.”*

*– A Soroptimist in Uzhhorod (translated from German)*

understood as legitimate and competent humanitarian actors. This is the case even though CSOs continue to achieve their aim and rapidly expand their projects and programmes during times of crisis.<sup>vi</sup>



### Context:

On the 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine, in clear violation of international law. Since the invasion, 14 million have fled their homes, and there has been widespread reports and evidence of war crimes, crimes against humanity and human rights violations.<sup>vii</sup> Sexual and gender-based violence, extra-judicial killings, indiscriminate killing of civilians and other alleged crimes have been recorded by experts and journalists.

Within weeks of the invasion, over 6.6 million people, the vast majority women and children, left Ukraine, with an estimated further 7 million being internally displaced. Neighbouring countries were quick to welcome refugees, with civil society organisations, including Soroptimist International, mobilising to find accommodation, essential goods and improve access to services. Poland and Romania were among the countries taking in the most refugees, with them each welcoming over 3.5 million and 950,000 refugees respectively.<sup>viii</sup>

## Conclusions & Recommendations:

- CSOs are able to mobilise quickly and effectively during times of crisis. They must be considered as first responders and should receive greater access to funding streams and should be used by governments and other organisations as a cost-effective mechanism to get aid to the most vulnerable.
- Women and girls are often disproportionately affected by the impacts of war. All alleged crimes during war must be investigated, prosecuted and special attention must be given to gender-based violence and crimes. If necessary, universal jurisdiction should be used to ensure accountability. With women and children being helped to leave Ukraine, special support should be given in their new countries of residence to achieve justice.
- Women and girls are able to be effective peacebuilders; the women, peace and security agenda must be fully achieved and implemented urgently. To achieve lasting peace in Ukraine, women must constitute half of those at the negotiation table.



## CONCLUSION

This report evidences the work being carried out by Soroptimist International clubs across the world to contribute to the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals. The projects highlighted in these pages represent thousands of projects which seek to improve the lives and status of all women and girls and address the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination they face. For years, SI and other civil society organisations have reported the detrimental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, violence, poverty and lack of education on the lives of all women and girls. As well as addressing global regression on gender equality, the work done by women at the grassroots demonstrates expertise, commitment and tremendous efforts to counteract the lack of bold, decisive action by states.

We need multidimensional action which centres on gender equality and education. Human rights and gender equality cannot be an 'add-on' to achieving the SDGs: they must be the basis of all programmes and policies. Efforts taken to achieve gender

equality and human rights will further the 2030 Agenda and ensure no one is left behind, providing dignity to all people, of all ages, everywhere, no matter their economic or social situation. A life-course approach to education and training is the key to transforming the lives of women and girls; programmes and policies should better harness this powerful approach to sustainable development.

Every single policy issue directly impacts gender equality; the Goals must be seen holistically. To achieve gender equality all sustainable development efforts and pre-existing policies, laws, and programmes must adapt to promote the achievement of gender equality. Together, gender equality and education make a powerful pairing. Life-long access to high-quality education and training, is transformative in empowering all women and girls, as well as in providing access to leadership opportunities. Education and skills development of women and girls results in the reduction of economic inequality and poverty.

## EDUCATION & CONFLICT

"Education changes peoples' lives, and this is especially true for women and girls. We must harness the potential of education and training to create a more equal and sustainable world in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Coming from Northern Ireland, I understand the impact conflict can have on communities and the role education has in harnessing the power of peace. Education programmes will be vital in rebuilding Ukraine and are critical for supporting refugee and displaced women and girls to be empowered in the places they now call home."

— SI President Maureen Maguire

## GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE & ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

"Women and girls face increasing rates of gender-based violence, and the pandemic has fueled this. To combat violence women and girls must be economically empowered. This gives them freedom over their own lives and choices. They deserve this on their own merits, but it also helps families and societies. We cannot think about violence and economic empowerment separately. Financially independent women are at lower risk of abuse, trafficking and exploitation. This must be factored in to states' decisions on social protection floors and sustainable development policies.

— SI Advocacy Adviser Bev Bucur



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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/archive/Publications/free\\_publications/TawilSe.pdf](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/archive/Publications/free_publications/TawilSe.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/kh>

[https://www.epdc.org/sites/default/files/documents/EPDC\\_NEP\\_2018\\_Cambodia.pdf](https://www.epdc.org/sites/default/files/documents/EPDC_NEP_2018_Cambodia.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/cameroon-humanitarian-dashboard-january-december-2021#:~:text=As%20of%2031%20December%202021,West%20and%20Far%20North%20regions.>

<sup>iv</sup> <sup>iv</sup> [schools-more-168-million-children-globally-have-been-completely-closed](https://schools-more-168-million-children-globally-have-been-completely-closed)

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/india/press-releases/covid-19-schools-more-168-million-children-globally-have-been-completely-closed>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Rapid%20Assessment%20-%20Womens%20CSOs.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/05/1118072>

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<sup>viii</sup> <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>