

An international volunteer organization working to provide women and girls with the education and training they need to achieve in local communities and throughout the world.

SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL OF THE AMERICAS

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 achieve 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 Soroptimist’s mission 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 her lifetime.
- 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 759 million illiterate adults are women.
- Forty to 70 percent of female murder victims are killed by their husband or intimate partners.
- Nearly 130 million women worldwide have experience female genital cutting.
- Eight out of 10 women workers are considered to be in vulnerable employment.

Girls:

- Of the more than 110 million children not in school, approximately 60 percent are girls.
- 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.
- Three million girls are at risk for female genital mutilation every year.
- As many as 80 percent of girls have been harassed at school.
- One out of every four girls never makes it past fifth grade.
- The average age of entry into prostitution for girls is 12 to 14.

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 throughout life. 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 trafficking and sex 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 themselves but also for their children.

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 since we believe that women and girls will continue to be victims of sex 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.

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 1,200 women received *Soroptimist Women's Opportunity Awards*. The awards, which totaled more than \$1.5 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 awarded more than \$25 million and to tens of thousands of women to help them achieve their dreams of a better life.

The *Soroptimist Violet Richardson Award* is a recognition program for young women ages 14-17 engaged in volunteer action within their communities or schools. The award is given to young women whose activities make the community and world a better place. The award seeks to enhance the self-esteem of these young women by recognizing their efforts.

The *Soroptimist Club Grants for Women and Girls* provides \$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 sex trafficking of women and girls; and teaching girls about careers in non-traditional fields.

The *Soroptimist Disaster Grants for Women and Girls* and *Soroptimist Project Matching* programs are jointly administered by Soroptimist International of the Americas and Soroptimist International of Europe. The Soroptimist Disaster Grants are issued to clubs or organizations to assist women and girls who are at-risk or are victims of disasters in their local communities. Soroptimist Project matching offer clubs in both federations the opportunity to request support for and offer support to Soroptimist projects around the world that are improving the lives of women and girls.

The *Soroptimist Workplace Campaign to End Domestic Violence* seeks to raise awareness about domestic violence as a workplace concern. 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. Clubs also participate in a campaign to institute domestic violence policies in their workplaces as a way to raise awareness and assist victims. Soroptimist has created a webpage dedicated to the program which has been specifically designed to provide information and materials for employees who are the target of domestic abuse, their co-workers and their employees.

In 2007, Soroptimist launched the *Soroptimists STOP Trafficking* public awareness campaign to address the sex trafficking and slavery of women and girls. Soroptimist chose an awareness-raising project because a necessary first step in ending sex trafficking and sex slavery is ensuring that everyone knows it exists. Soroptimist clubs also pursue initiatives addressing prevention, advocacy for better laws, and victim services.

The *Soroptimist Teen Dating Violence Project* is also an awareness project that was designed to help clubs raise awareness about teen dating violence and to promote healthy teen relationships. Soroptimist has created a bookmark and other resources to help clubs raise awareness of this issue in their communities.

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

What is the Live Your Dream initiative and what role does it play in the Soroptimist mission?

Live Your Dream is a Soroptimist organizational strategy designed to re-energize our brand and inspire additional avenues of engagement to strengthen our mission and expand our reach. Live Your Dream is an online community empowering offline action, helping women and girls to live their dreams. The Live Your Dream website will be the primary vehicle through which the participants will be engaged. The site serves as an introduction to Soroptimist that uses social networking technology to inspire all visitors to live their dreams and to help others live theirs, which is appealing to younger and more technologically savvy women who increasingly seek community online.