Your Excellencies, colleagues, I am Maureen Maguire, President of Soroptimist International, and I present this statement on behalf of SI's members in 121 countries who work with communities to improve the lives of women and girls.

We have seen first-hand how women and girls have experienced increased inequality due to the health, economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, I shall focus on the role of education and training in building back better.

During COVID-19 women have left education and work in significant numbers because of caring responsibilities or working in informal sectors - in low-income countries 92% of women work in the informal sector. Barriers to education and training, including poverty, lack of safety and violence, mean many have left their studies, and it will be harder or impossible for them to return. In some societies we have seen that this has increased unwanted pregnancies, and child, early and forced marriages.

Providing education and training opportunities is one of the most powerful actions we can take. To promote sustainable economies, it is vital that women and girls are included. Education and training opportunities must be expanded, and support given to women and girls to return to school. The world of work is changing at such a fast pace that it is essential that women and girls have access to technology and training opportunities throughout their life course to acquire the skills they need to compete in the work place.

We need system-wide change to ensure all women and girls are empowered equals. Work patterns and environments must adjust to ensure that women & girls in all their multiple & intersecting forms of discrimination are equal participants and leaders in the world of work. With widening gender gaps states must act now.

Education and training measures, programmes, and outcomes taken to build back better from COVID-19 should only be considered successful if they contribute to eliminating inequality to the benefit of all.

Thank you.