A special letter on the occasion of Women’s Day – 8th March 2012:
A report on our Soroptimist commitment as “a Global Voice for Women”
at the 56th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York,

Dear Union and Single Club Presidents, Dear Governors,

“Changes are not made in New York or Davos, changes are made in the community with rural women”, was Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Leymah Gbowee’s strong statement at the 56th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York. Its theme:“ Empowering Rural Women” suited best to our SIE-Biennium theme “Water and Food”.

I am happy to report to you that we were not only one of the largest groups of NGOs present (42 Soroptimists), but also remarkably successful: our International Assistant Programme Director (IAPD) Anusha Santhirasthipam held an almost five-minutes’ intervention at an important Panel discussion “The role of gender responsive governance and Networks for the empowerment of Rural Women”. As there were so many people wishing to attend this, the panel could also be viewed in a so-called “overflow” room next door, in which other Soroptimists were sitting, among them our SIE-extension chair Maria-Luisa Frosio, who felt: “It was a great moment” when everyone applauded after Anusha’s intervention.

The same evening – at a reception held by the Israeli ambassador– people came up to me saying that they had listened to a very interesting intervention by Soroptimist International. You will understand how proud I felt, too. At this reception Mazel Renford, the director of the “Golda Meir Mount Carmel Education Center” in Haifa, Israel, praised Soroptimist International who have supported this Center through SI-Germany since its beginning in 1961. Maria-Luisa witnessed the same at the UN-side event on “Rural women: from vulnerability to sustainability”. She was invited by the Permanent Mission of Italy at the UN together with another six (only six!) NGOs to meet the Italian Minister of Labour, Social Policies and Gender Equality. She gave a presentation on SI and requested that Italy sign the "Istanbul Convention on violence against women" as soon as possible. This is the kind of lobby-work Soroptimists can always do: check in the Internet which conventions have not been signed and/or ratified and ask your governments why this is so.

Soroptimist International was responsible for two side-events at CSW. One on “From Seeding to Feeding: the Role of Women and Girls Across the Life Cycle of Food”, in which I, together with Soroptimists from Nigeria, the Philippines held ten minutes’ speeches as well as listening to a
contribution from Solar Cookers International, all under the moderation of the IPD, Hilary Ratcliffe and with a conclusion given by Eve Crowley from the UN-Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The second side-event was on “Violence Against Rural Women and Girls: Experiences and Solutions” - with amongst others girls from World YWCA and World Association of Girl Guides & Girls Scouts (WAGGS).

It was highly impressive to hear these girls talk of e.g. the difficulties young women have in countries like El Salvador, in a society where women lack self-esteem due to their life-long treatment as less valuable creatures. It was just exactly these personal testimonies from girls throughout the less developed world which touched a nerve and proved that the fight against “Violence” has to be intensified worldwide. It will not amaze you that the solution to these problems is: Education, education, education.

Compared to these shocking reports it was a heart-warming experience to hear a girl from Rwanda say how much she wanted to thank Soroptimist International for their long-lasting commitment to her country and its women. And again: an entire audience applauded!

We are already preparing for next years’ 57th CSW: Ulrike Neubert, our SIE-Program Director, intervened at the German embassy for a possible joint side-event at CSW on the subject of “Violence against Women”. This will definitely be a special theme on which our Norwegian Soroptimists (three of them were present in New York this year) can offer their input as experts through their successful and effective support of Moldovan Soroptimists in the fight against trafficking and prostitution.

We will also be present at the Rio+20 Earth Summit in June 2012. This is in line with our previous commitment shown via a large delegation present at the Bonn-Conference 2011 on Sustainable Development and Suba Parthiban’s participation in the Regional Preparatory Meeting of Rio+20 in Geneva in 2011. Believe me, we are known at this level of NGO work and nobody asks what “Soroptimist” means. We will continue our precious work at the Council of Europe (CoE) with our representative Françoise Ferey who has just reported on the CoE’s combat against “Sexual violence against children”. Our Partnership with Women for Water will again be a successful collaboration at the 6th World Water Forum in Marseille (12th to 17th March).

These are only some fragments of our many and varied activities as Lobbyists for our common Soroptimist cause: to be a global voice for women! It was the fruitful collaboration between all four Soroptimist Federations at CSW with our SI-President Alice Wells at the head and our six UN-representatives that made us so successful. Let me highlight in this context the importance of your and every Soroptimist’s role in wider society and the local community in lobbying for Women and Children both individually and collectively with your clubs.

Let us all enjoy our common successes and continue our hard work towards making this world a better place to live.

Warm regards,