

NORGESUNIONEN
AV SOROPTIMISTER

75

1939-2014



A VOICE FOR WOMEN
FOR 75 YEARS

75 years of building soroptimism in Norway

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Soroptimism arrived in Norway in 1933, when Suzanne Noël from Paris inspired the formation of the first club, in Oslo, with 33 members. A few years later a second club, in Bergen, made possible the establishing of the Norwegian union in 1939. To these pioneers our lives, our ever-more-rapid technological revolution and our opportunities would probably have appeared as if we live on an alien planet. It may be just as difficult for us to see and understand the culture that shaped our sisters' lives 75 years ago. Achieving an education and a profession in a totally male-dominated country must have required exceptional talent and determination, plus unflagging persistence. Yet, we are connected across the 75 years by the vision, the will to learn and develop – and by our striving to become true soroptimists, better 'sisters'.

One of our union's major projects symbolises this commitment. On the flight home from the Izmir gathering in 1983, a dentist from Eastern Norway and an assistant nurse from the West coast conceived the idea of an education fund. They were inspired by African soroptimists' stories about young girls' conditions in their home countries. In Norway, their appeal had both logical and emotional impact: 'We know that state aid mostly benefits men. Women are right at the back of the queue.' Now, the soroptimist network with its personal contacts could ensure that every krone,

NOK, would go straight and undiminished to worthy recipients. Several clubs embraced the project immediately, and gradually every club joined. In 1990, interest on capital provided the first scholarships to talented girls whom African sisters vouched for.

Basic schooling, training and studies that enable the recipients to build futures require minimal amounts from a Norwegian perspective. Around the millennium three years' education typically cost NOK 3600, the equivalent of about £360. However, when bank interest rates tumbled the fund needed continued growth in order to yield sufficient annual income. All the clubs – there are now 66 – kept contributing. By 2010 the capital exceeded NOK 2.2 million, and two years later the soroptimist governors' meeting in Budapest honoured the fund with its 'Best Practice Award' for having empowered more than 500 girls and women to develop their talents.



Kristin Ruder, left; Sigrid Ag,
Margaret Støle Karlsen, Gerd Halmø.

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This story illustrates our striving to appreciate, and benefit from, rich diversity. Questions around 'who are we, what are our values and how can we develop into better sisters' run like a refrain through our entire history. At such times, the views of the Norwegian pioneer Hanna Lund serve as guidance. Back in 1951 she noted that UN's then three-year old declaration of human rights has a major shortcoming: "Morals accept no right which does not entail an obligation. Rights alone will create a claimant mentality instead of a felt responsibility. It is our duty to fight the un-nuanced spiritual values of our times." Moreover, she emphasised that peace organisations such as SI and Rotary can have much more influence than membership numbers would indicate, particularly because they require members to embody high moral standards. However, our influence does depend on well-prepared and convincingly presented argumentation in local, national, and international fora. Precisely this vital ability to argue well and be heard describes an important element in Norwegian soroptimism. The country's neutrality during WWI meant that women lacked the drivers into a wide range of professions that occurred in the UK, for example. In the 1930s Norway, professionally prominent women were exceptions.

Academic education was rare, including in the so-called bourgeoisie, and standing up to address an audience was considered highly inappropriate. Therefore, club meetings served as excellent training grounds: learning to trust each other sufficiently to dare risk, the soroptimists took turns to talk about background and profession, and to share 5-minute thoughts and themes. Siri Bjercke, who eventually came to lead SIE recruitment, remembers how she almost fainted when, early on, she had to deliver a thank-you speech to the union board. "Saying no to a task is to say no to one's own development" she now says, having happily led a workshop with more than 200 participants in Sydney.

Spreading the message

In the 1930s, woman's role was to get married and be well provided for. However, musical talent was accepted and appreciated. Quite a few of the early members were musicians; the pianist Mary Barratt Due became a leading light in the organisation, enthusiastically promoting soroptimism on every concert tour. When the Oslo club re-opened formally in 1945 after living in hiding during the German occupation, she became its President. Three years later, when Norway took responsibility for the Federation, she was the natural SIE President who among many other tasks helped initiate *The Link*. Her Presidency culminated with a

large international congress in Oslo in 1950, where her 'unquenchable energy and sovereign refusal to consider all reservations' were praised. Just one event suffices to demonstrate her organisational talents: after leading the union's first two-day meeting in 1946, with guests from Belgium, England, the Netherlands and Denmark, she invited all the 50 to 60 participants to her home and played a concert for them.

Both Mary Barratt Due and an equally able and keen promoter, the dentist Ulrikke Greve Dal, carried the costs themselves of their numerous trips to inspire new clubs and visit their 'sisters'. Their untiring efforts impress even more when we consider distances and time-consuming travel: Norway is an impractically extended and mountainous country, riven by numerous fjords. Roads were primitive, and trips to the high north would typically require almost a week each way, by train, bus, ferries and coastal steamers. The fact that very few people could afford much travel indicates how precious these visits were. The country was poor long before depression hit badly in 1929. The invitation to an Oslo club meeting in 1939 reflects the strain: "if possible, contribute a cheap surprise parcel to be auctioned for refugee aid...and do bring 1 soup spoon measure of coffee!" War-time rationing continued long past 1945; imports were minimal, and only men such as district GPs were allowed to buy cars until 1960.

Stony silence – and yet the idea took hold

Yet, some people abroad considered Norway attractively exotic. Suzanne Noël, the French plastic surgeon who introduced soroptimism on the Continent in 1924, and inspired and chartered numerous clubs in rapid succession, was a charismatic enthusi-

ast. She considered the 'sisters' her own children and travelled repeatedly also to the high North – in spite of the initial frosty reception she experienced in Oslo. Having made the acquaintance of a Norwegian in Paris, she contacted his mother, Hanne Henriette Bryn, who wrote children's books. During a visit to Oslo Suzanne Noël persuaded the author to invite prominent women to lunch in the hope of starting the first soroptimist club in Norway.

Her proposal was met with stony silence.

Yet, the seed had been sown. After Dr Noël's departure, the author and a friend spent every Sunday morning for several months writing invitations to women they thought might be interested. 33 turned up at a gathering on November 17, 1933, and rapidly elected the required officers. Having started by meeting every other Saturday, they switched to every third week – always with one member explaining her training and profession, and another giving the 5-minute talk, in order to become better acquainted. Gradually, they formulated their commitment: "ideas and initiatives must originate in the clubs. Union, Federation and SIA are administrative entities that give voice to the clubs' opinions." Aadel Bülow-Hansen, who was later declared the physiotherapist of the century, saw soroptimism mainly as applied ethics – a way of living. But she also included each sister's personal life in her vision: "An open mind and sincere participation at the right moment may be more valuable than a large aid project. Our work with refugees and students rests as much as possible on contact and personal involvement, enriching us all, on both sides."

Painful atonement

The term 'enriching' had particular application because so little was widely known about the huge and remote world out there, and practically only



printed words and pictures were available to show and tell; Norway had one radio channel, and its single TV channel did not become generally available until the mid-1960s. However, an early appeal for intercultural contact at home came through the Nansen relief in 1937. Fridtjof Nansen's work for refugees after the revolution in Russia, and the Nobel Peace Prize he was awarded in 1922, inspired the soroptimists. A Nansen relief worker asked the Oslo club to invite lonely refugees to meetings. Soon after 1945, international connections resumed. When Dr Garot from Antwerp came to present the formal charter to the Oslo club in 1946, Elizabeth Howes, the liaison officer from London, was also present.

However, re-establishing bonds entailed needs for painful atonement. In 1947, Oslo members sent food parcels to Austria, "hoping that possible contacts could be enjoyable for both parties." Three years later the most important issue at a governors' meeting in Oslo was whether the clubs in Germany and Austria, which had barely survived, should be re-admitted to the Federation. Mary Barratt Due was in favour, and five of the then six Norwegian clubs declared that "we are working for the world we want to have, that world includes Germany, and Germany needs our help." Aadel Bülow-Hansen met the German governor Anneliese Glaser at a gathering in The Hague and wrote to the Hammerfest club to ask whether she could bring Glaser to the national convention there. German troops had torched North Norway before retreating. The Hammerfest President responded that although she did not feel prepared to meet a German, most members wanted to say yes and honour the goals of building peace and understanding. Arriving by coastal steamer and seeing the ruins of Hammerfest, Glaser turned white. She went for a long solitary walk, and returned to ask Bülow-

Hansen how she would have felt if her own nation had erased a small town up by the vast ice, that could not possibly have been a military target. But Glaser made the connection. The President who had felt unable to receive a German concluded her farewell speech with "thank you for coming".

Northerners excelling in hospitality

Actually, the clubs in the north kept excelling in hospitality throughout the years when every travelling soroptimist was supposed to visit as many clubs as possible, and to keep up correspondence with as many 'sisters' as she could manage, not least in other countries and on other continents. Some 100 soroptimists came to a union meeting in Hammerfest in 1959 – where the only hotel had 20 beds, so 'the entire town' opened their homes. 50 years later, when the clubs received 28 soroptimists from Europe and Turkey, the members felt the visit as 'a vitamin injection.' And whenever soroptimists, using contacts, travelled on the coastal steamers, often with family and friends, club members would invite them to their homes and take them sight-seeing. Opportunities might be numerous: in each harbour, two ships call every day, one going south and the other northwards.

Incidentally, the Hammerfest soroptimists made a revolutionary move back in 1952: dropping the formal 'De', equivalent to the French 'vous' and the German 'Sie', and switching to Christian names and the informal 'du' which was reserved for family, children, and very close friends. Many doubted that it would be possible, but once each had stood up in turn and revealed her Christian name, they felt like real sisters. However, not until 12 years later did a national meeting vote to copy the brave northerners.

Another 1952 innovation that inspired a treasured tradition was introduced when, during her Federation Presidency, the Danish pioneer Clara Hammerich chartered one of 'her' many Norwegian clubs, this time in Steinkjer. Bringing in a three-armed candlestick she lit one candle for soroptimism and its ideals, one for all the connected nations, and the third one for every little link in the chain.

Generous invitations from clubs abroad

Hospitality and the nurturing of contacts and friendship are predominant throughout the early history. Those who were able to travel abroad had generous offers from soroptimists in many countries, ranging from staying as house guests to attending courses and special events. Many Norwegians benefited from annual invitations from the Royan club to attend 10-day French courses and gain new contacts. Also, since British soroptimists were not allowed to send money abroad from their £11,000 Post War Relief Fund, they arranged informative visits every summer. One year, nine beneficiaries among the 51 were Norwegian. On their return they would talk about their experiences in as many clubs as possible, and exchange letters with their new friends.

Experiences, contacts, and information about invitations were spread through the newsletter *Norsk Soroptima*, which grew out of three type-written pages dated May 1948. Combining reports from club meetings with national and international news and explanations about our consultative UN status, the newsletters reflect ever-changing and developing preoccupations and conditions. In 1969, the union decided to cut costs by using this bulletin as the one and only carrier of dates and agendas for major meetings. Throughout, efforts

are made to minimise administration costs and maximise funds for projects. In the 1990s, representatives voted to allow advertising in the newsletter. For several years, advertisements generated substantial incomes that went into the education fund. However, responsibility for *Norsk Soroptima* shifts between clubs and keen saleswomen have unfortunately been lacking in recent years. Currently the newsletter has been cut from 10 to six issues a year, and the underlying question is whether we would do better, and cut costs, by switching entirely to social media on the internet.

Early to spot emerging themes and problems

Looked at chronologically, the 66 years of *Norsk Soroptima* serve to illustrate how often soroptimists were early to spot social developments and emerging themes. Agendas include career counselling for young girls; assistance and companionship for the elderly; attitudes to 'illegitimate' children and new abortion regulations; pension rights for women who had no paid work; the refusal of the state church to accept female clergy; the use of safety belts in cars and CPR training; and establishing a home for sufferers of cerebral paralysis – who until the 1950s were often 'stored' for life in institutions for the 'crazy'. Another example is the revolutionary decision to prohibit smoking in the hall where the national convention met – in 1973!

Parallel with this type of learning at home, soroptimists were introduced to the global problem of refugees already in the 1950s. Ulrikke Greve Dal and Aadel Bülow-Hansen visited all the clubs to explain how they could make a difference to elderly refugees in Vienna who did not live in camps and therefore received no assistance from The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration funds. Food parcels and a little money could make a big difference, and personal contact through letters even more so. By 1967, 26 of the then 29 clubs parti-

cipated, helping 60 refugees between them, and the project continued until 1975.

Much to learn in a monocultural country

This experience may have inspired the three clubs that in the same year set up projects to assist refugees arriving in Norway, which was until then a largely monocultural nation. After groups of Ugandans came large numbers of boat refugees from Vietnam, who had been picked up by Norwegian ships. Active soroptimists had to learn that when widely different cultures meet, a great deal of effort is required to understand each other's reactions and habits, and not least to sense what it can be like to lose one's cultural profile and start from zero as an undefined 'nobody' without any generally known cultural references. Many clubs invited newcomers to their homes and meetings and arranged courses and excursions, always with the idea that we are gaining at least as much. In 2009, the Bærum club received the Federation's Best Practice Award for 30 years' involvement with immigrant women. Two years later it was the turn of the Borge club, for its project which comprises everything from cooking and sewing courses to Christmas parties and forest hikes.

Compared to this, projects for foreign students were less demanding. From the early 1960s many clubs arranged get-togethers, home visits and excursions for students, also from the international summer school in Oslo. But whereas the idea was to enhance the foreigners' experiences of Norwegian culture and hospitality, a new and vital dimension entered with the adoption of projects to act as catalysts in the lives of girls and young women in poor countries. Examples are our 'little Turkey project', involvement in the Mount Carmel Training Center in Israel for African women, our own education fund, and our involvement in Moldova. In addition, numerous projects result

as many soroptimists work on assignments abroad and see needs and opportunities to contribute, not least through personal contacts. This kind of insight into local conditions helps to prevent the kind of failure that has characterised many large, official projects; the key being to provide what people really need and want, even if that is not the way we wanted to assist. There is little use in providing a good loaf of bread if the recipient has a full stomach but freezes.

The 'little Turkey project' was inspired by SIA's 50th anniversary project, the multi-function school in Istanbul. In the late 1960s, three clubs paid schooling for three talented girls. Letter contacts inspired more clubs to join and expand the scheme; the beneficiaries named themselves 'Friends of Norway' and hoped to form a club in Ankara. Over 30 years Norwegian clubs funded numerous women who in many cases completed academic educations – including two professors with PhD, several medical doctors, chemists, engineers, mathematicians, one biologist and one economist. However, by 2002 the project was terminated because it had become too complicated, and the rules for contact between recipients and soroptimists had been neglected.

Clearly, 'little Turkey' contributed to the process of learning and failing and trying again. When our union was asked to assist with the establishing of clubs and a union in Poland, the clubs that took on the task had a hard time because communication remained problematic. The visit of 15 Polish women cost a great deal more than budgeted, and the guests failed to participate sufficiently. The importance became clear of gaining real knowledge of relevant conditions, of planning realistically and in detail, of continuously checking processes and correcting shortcomings, and, importantly, of evaluating the outcome.

On the positive side was the realisation that it is possible to obtain contributions from official entities. When the first drilling for water in Senegal started in 1985, the state aid agency Norad contributed NOK 80 for every

NOK 20 that the 13 involved clubs raised. In addition, the foreign office contributed NOK 100,000 to our project. This kind of experience has proved very useful in Moldova, where our current major project keeps producing side effects. After Siri Bjercke had reported about her Federation-initiated visit in Chisinau, several Norwegian clubs together with one in the Netherlands involved themselves jointly in different projects; most importantly the work to stop trafficking. Our union applied for funding from the Norwegian umbrella organisation FOKUS for a three-year project to prevent the sale of girls from institutions, and was granted NOK 2.1 million. In 2009, the Holmestrand and Tønsberg clubs won the Federation Best Practice Award, and the same year SI President Hanne Jensbo allocated the funds from the December 10th appeal to our project. Another source of funding is a Nordic project, the sale of symbolic pink pins to generate funds for working in Moldova and raising awareness about trafficking at home. Now, Norwegian clubs are 'god-parents' for clubs in Cahul, Causeni, Chisinau, Edinet, and Nisporeni.

Norwegian strategy plan inspired SI

Our soroptimist culture builds on personal contribution and learning; repeatedly, our representatives have stressed their unease about top-down 'decreed-from-above' costly projects and complicating hierarchies. Also, the typical desire of each Federation leader and each SI President to put personal stamps on their two-year periods made for lacking continuity. To counter this, Agnete Kjellin instigated the creation of a strategy plan for union short-term and long-term objectives, complete with continuous follow-up and evaluation. Hanne Jensbo was so impressed that she made the plan a model for the entire SI. We have, however, experienced many ups and downs. When we were asked to take over the Federation in 1972, we had to decline for lack of suitable candidates under 70 who had the necessary international experience. Ten years later, Eva Skaarberg was qualified

to take over the Presidency, and several other Norwegians shouldered Federation positions. Her Presidency aimed to improve communications and collaboration between African and European soroptimists, to plan leadership training and modernise the administration. But at home, many clubs struggled to recruit and retain young members, and in the most severe cases to inspire new initiatives to prevent fading away. After reaching 2000 members around 2005, total membership declined somewhat for a few years. Recruitment of new and younger members now has high priority; one key question is what we have to offer in contrast to the plethora of other organisations, the floods of stimuli and the competing demands on professionals' time. In this context, the need for visibility keeps being emphasised. Major projects should be used to attract attention and, as invitations to Peace Prize ceremonies for the campaign against land mines and for Kofi Annan did, give us positive coverage in the media.

Reaching out to refugees and immigrants

Our current union President Gerd Halmø stresses that in various ways, our clubs led the way into today's multicultural Norway. As we see it, soroptimist ideals accord more with the Canadian symbol of a mosaic society where different elements are joined into a large entity while allowed to maintain their individual character, than with the American melting pot. As a result of our involvement with refugees and other immigrants we have the privilege of counting many newcomers among our members. One example is Marie Goretti Uwimana who arrived as a Rwandan refugee in Northern Norway in the late 1990s and was a member of the Sandnessjøen club for several years. She has six children, is an assistant nurse and a support contact, sings in a choir, and takes special interest in the psychic health of refugees. Clearly, her life experience constitutes a valuable resource in today's Norway.

In order to reach out to newcomers and demonstrate the attractions of soroptimism, our two-year pilot mentoring project differed from the original Federation ideas about mentoring for potential leaders, without any weight on ethnicity. Well-educated women from non-European cultures typically struggle desperately to be considered interesting job applicants in Norway. Our idea is not to inspire them to copy Norwegians, but to help the 'adepts' master strategies for having their education, their abilities and the value of their approaches recognised. When they find suitable employment such women are likely to be strongly motivated, and to contribute different and valuable views and perspectives. Continuous evaluation and adjustments benefited the project and yielded experience that may inspire single clubs, or groups of clubs, to arrange new mentoring projects for immigrants, possibly in collaboration with other entities that organise mentoring.

In today's Norway, the clubs' strongest appeal may be contact with women in totally different professions, together with the satisfaction of contributing to projects and collaborating with soroptimists in different cultures who, thanks to modern communications, have a face and may become friends. However, the appeal depends on good leadership of meetings with interesting professional content and on the visibility of activities, not least the international ones. In order to make soroptimism better known and optimally effective we must improve our use of the internet and possibly also employ social media meeting places such as Facebook.

The simple recipe - togetherness

In the words of our 90-year old pioneer Ellen Gade, the recipe is simple: "The nature of soroptimism is to do things together."

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