

## The Soroptimist Response to the Refugee Crisis: Think Globally – Act Locally

Forced migration is certainly not a new phenomenon. Throughout history people have fled their home countries as a consequence of war, geopolitics, persecution or economic crises. However, the massive exodus of thousands and thousands of refugees from Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, to Europe, many of whom are vulnerable women, has recently reached a truly alarming scale. While all concerned governments must seek a comprehensive political response, the dramatic humanitarian situation also requires the mobilization of NGOs and local associations, such as Soroptimist International of Europe, as is already happening in some countries.

With its more than 80,000 members, 35,000 of whom are in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, **Soroptimist International** is the largest service organisation of professional women in the world. Since the European Federation was established in 1930, Soroptimists, whose mission is to improve the lives of women and girls, have witnessed the disastrous effects of forced migration, particularly on women.

### Women and Girls: At high risk

Women refugees and asylum seekers commonly face the biggest challenges during their difficult journey to a refugee camp and safety, including various forms of male violence and discrimination. As women increasingly travel alone, with or without children, they especially suffer from the absence of support and protection from family and friends. Isolated from the social environment and network of their respective communities, women are thus particularly vulnerable.

Sadly, male violence is integral part of the women refugees' experience. As reported by several institutions, displaced women and women refugees are frequently victims of rape by officials, smugglers, other refugees and traffickers. Traffickers often take advantage of the situation, and, if not forced into prostitution, migrant women may need to sell their bodies as a means to buy food or find housing for themselves and their families.

### Soroptimists witness and respond

Soroptimists are actively and concretely engaged in their respective communities throughout the 62 countries in which Soroptimist International of Europe is present. Clubs are independent and know best what works locally. Our response is never standardized but tailored to the local needs. The thousands of projects are traditionally aligned to the conditions of their respective countries and the needs of their particular displaced persons.

## ***Special call to Soroptimist Clubs: Be Active – Be Influential!***

As this new major human crisis develops, **Soroptimists Clubs** have two major roles to play:

### 1. "Adopt" a refugee or a Women's Community Centre

**Concept:** As professional women active in diverse sectors of the local and national economy and society, Soroptimists are highly respected in their communities, and through their strong network, they have access to many different professions.

**Action:** Collaborate with the leaders of Migrant Centres and other professionals to help migrant women and children gain access to the response chain of urgency (short term). In the long term, help refugees integrate rapidly into the host country's society and economy. Several great project ideas are already being implemented. Here are few examples:

#### **Projects:**

- Mobilize locally and provide a first aid response, i.e. supplies, whenever a humanitarian call is made (immediate response)



- Place special focus on women's security and prevention of violence
- Consider women's hygienic needs and assist with basic materials
- Bring together women refugees and Soroptimists, listen to their problems and offer friendship
- Help traumatized women regain self-respect and confidence
- Teach women refugees the language of the host country (long-term response)
- Help women understand their 'new' rights and obligations
- Teach women local habits and customs
- Guide women in the maze of employment
- Mentor women by sharing knowledge, networking and strengthening their skills
- Give women scholarships

## 2. Lobby locally, nationally and internationally

**Concept:** As credible witnesses to the problems confronting women and girls on a daily basis, we function as a 'global voice for women'. Soroptimists have to fulfil their duties related to the general consultative status granted by the United Nations (ECOSOC) and to the participatory status granted by the Council of Europe.

**Action:** More than ever, Soroptimists are committed to act as advocates for the rights and conditions of women and girls by alerting institutions and authorities about emerging issues. In the case of refugees and asylum seekers, we appeal to authorities in every country in which we are present to protect women. Examples:

**Projects:**

- Engage with the authorities and inform them of Soroptimists' availability to help
- Engage with leaders of asylum and migrant centres and offer help to be a voice for women and girls at local and national levels
- If a witness of or being told stories of abuse, alert local and/or national authorities on bad practices
- Join forces with other women associations at a national level
- Engage with universities to raise awareness of opportunities for young women refugees to access higher education
- At national level, expose and put pressure on governments for not putting into practice relevant laws and treaties (i.e. the Istanbul Convention on Violence against Women)