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Smart investments: financing for gender equality

Building new partnerships and alliances for gender equality and the empowerment of women in the ECE Region

Note by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)¹

Summary

Diverse, transparent and mutually reinforcing partnerships among and with governments, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and international organizations are integral to the achievement of the Beijing Platform for Action, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The strength of the partnerships is based on the institutional capacities of the partners themselves. National partnerships within government institutions in advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women have improved since 2015, primarily around national responses to gender-based violence. Partnerships between governments and non-governmental organizations have been maintained, focused mainly on dialogue around the development of national policies and legislation on gender equality and the empowerment of women; systematizing the monitoring of gender equality and the empowerment of women; and in provision of services to survivors of gender-based violence. The lack of available funds and deterioration of civic space in parts of the region has impacted the opportunities for non-governmental organizations to advocate for change on gender equality and the empowerment of women. Public-private partnerships on gender equality and the empowerment of women remain an elusive goal in the region, with some initial inroads under the Women's Empowerment Principles. National and regional discourse on gender equality and the empowerment of women has increasingly emphasized the need to ensure the representation of youth and of marginalized communities. Partnership with organizations representing marginalized groups is critical to ensure their engagement as actors for transformative changes.

¹ The present document was submitted late due to delay in inputs from partner organizations.



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I. Introduction

1. Building on the commitments and norms enshrined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require a lived equality for all. Transparent and mutually reinforcing government/non-governmental and private sector partnerships are essential at the national level in ensuring an integrated response to the SDGs and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action's implementation therein, in a manner which tackles the root causes of all forms of inequalities and how these inequalities intersect.
2. The regional review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action twenty-five years on provides countries in the UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) region with an opportunity to reflect on the gains around gender equality and the empowerment of women, the degree to which these gains are challenged, and what gaps remain. As part of this process, the present thematic background note on *Building New Partnerships and Alliances for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in the ECE Region* looks at the role which international, national and regional partnerships, alliances and networks are playing in terms of advancing the SDG and Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action agenda, and the challenges therein. The note closes with recommendations for future action.

II. Regional trends

3. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Agenda 2030 and the SDGs reiterate the importance of partnerships – within and between governments; between government institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)²; alliances and networks within NGOs at all levels; Public/Private partnerships; and strengthened collaboration and support from the international community. Regardless if governmental or non-governmental, the positioning and capacities of national and regional stakeholders – financial, human, administrative, and institutional – directly impact their abilities to establish and foster sustained, strategic, mutually-beneficial relationships.
4. The dynamic nature of partnerships and alliances in support of gender equality and the empowerment of women in the countries in the ECE region³ can be viewed through the broader lens of the drivers of inequalities, including the processes of democracy, rule of law and human rights in the countries. Too often, global discourse on inequalities and responses do not resonate throughout the entire ECE region, given the diversity of histories and levels of development. Further, in modern history, the former communist countries come from backgrounds of “relatively equal distributions of income, relatively broad access to social services, and relatively small gender disparities”.⁴ Nonetheless, inequalities persist, and key drivers are gender, class, race and ethnicity, geography, age, disability, occupation, and income.⁵ The rise of populism in a number of countries throughout the ECE region and its rhetoric has fostered a belief that human rights and gender equality are potential threats.
5. While populism and a pushback on women’s rights⁶ are on the rise, so are the voices and influence of diverse groups who have historically been in the margins, including women,

² For the purposes of this paper, NGOs refer to civil society organizations, non-for-profit foundations, independent non-for-profit academic and research organizations, non-for-profit media organizations, watchdog organizations, activist networks, and national women’s movements/networks.

³ The ECE region covers 56 countries in Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, as well as Canada, Israel, and the United States: www.unece.org/oes/nutshell/member_states_representatives.html.

⁴ UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and CIS (2016), *Regional Human Development Report - Progress at Risk: Inequalities and Human Development in Eastern Europe, Turkey and Central Asia – Executive Summary*, p. 1.

⁵ Ibid. p. 5.

⁶ Opening Remarks of the UN Secretary-General at the 63rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 11 March 2019, available at: www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2019-03-11/csw-remarks-opening-of-63rd-session.

ethnic minorities, persons living with disabilities, and LGBTIQ. This important momentum is as a result of – and is challenged by – the restrictions for civic engagement in parts of the region.

A. National level partnerships – government and non-governmental organizations

6. With some notable exceptions within the EU, national gender/women's machineries in the region face the inter-connected challenges of vague remits, limited authority, relative marginalization within government decision-making and policy and budgetary processes, limited human and financial resources, and limited outreach among local government departments. These realities challenge the national gender/women's machinery in fostering partnerships and networks within their own government bodies and institutions, as well as with NGOs (including academia) and private sector.

7. In Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, there has been an overall increase in national gender/women's machinery capacities in using gender mainstreaming tools; enhanced coordination skills particularly in the development of national policies and laws; as well as increased capacity to monitor the overall status of gender equality and the empowerment of women, including national compliance and/or alignment to international commitments and standards. These deepened capacities to coordinate have resulted in more consistent networking and building partnerships among government institutions in the last five years. The capacity development has in part been made possible through the support of international organizations and institutions such as the UN, the European Commission (EC) and the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe (CoE) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

8. Regional trends since 2015 show that national-level parliamentary networks and caucuses for women members of Parliament have increased, and these formal and informal partnerships, often crossing party lines, provide an important partnership for national gender/women's machinery and NGOs to advance the gender equality and the empowerment of women agenda.⁷

9. In addition to the improved monitoring of gender equality and the empowerment of women by national government institutions, another key area benefitting from the increased partnerships among government institutions is the state response to gender-based violence. For those CoE member States who have signed the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (also known as the Istanbul Convention) since 2011, and for some Central Asian countries, the last five years has witnessed important momentum for increased national partnerships on gender-based violence response. In Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, several countries adopted harmonized case referral systems for both gender-based violence and child protection; as well as harmonized data collection standards and systems for the generation of administrative data on gender-based violence. The adoption of both the case referral and case monitoring systems has strengthened the coordination and partnerships between the national gender/women's machinery, government bodies established to coordinate gender-based violence and child protection and the line ministries and police, the national statistical offices and to a lesser extent, local government bodies. However, implementation of these harmonized procedures and systems continues to be a challenge. This is in part due to the continued lack of resources and authority of the government body tasked with responding to gender-based violence – in some countries the national gender/women's machinery – to enforce these harmonized standards within government. Enhanced government coordination in responding to human trafficking is often embedded within the broader state-coordinated responses, including within the gender-based violence services provided by government and NGOs.

⁷ UNDP (2016), *Strengthening Women's Political Participation – An analysis of the impact of women's parliamentary networks in Europe and Central Asia*, pp. 8 -9.

10. In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action observed, “(t)he growing strength of the NGO sector, particularly women’s organizations and feminist groups, has become a driving force for change. NGOs have played an important advocacy role in advancing legislation or mechanisms to ensure the promotion of women. They have also become catalysts for new approaches to development.”⁸ With some exceptions, in the last five years, governments throughout the ECE region have regularized and systematized the engagement of NGOs in the development of policies around gender equality and the empowerment of women, and to a lesser extent, the development of operational procedures and regulatory frameworks under legislation.

11. With the financial struggle which most women’s NGOs face just to stay afloat within a severely restricted financial aid environment, trends over the past five years show that fostering informal or formal networks remains a challenge and is hard to maintain. Limited resources can cause competition and result in mistrust. For many NGOs, the energy that would otherwise go into long-term advocacy and strategizing, communicating and growing national understanding around the importance of gender equality and the empowerment of women in country, is instead invested into efforts to sustain the NGO’s work. Further, there is a growing shift – and in some instances, a divide – in many countries in the region between the stalwarts of the women’s movement and the new advocates and groups engaging in human rights and social justice. In a number of countries throughout the region, NGOs face increased pressure and restrictions from governments in terms of their freedoms of association, assembly and expression, and through legislative requirements around their administration, reporting and receiving of funds from international organizations.⁹ Further, throughout the ECE region, in a number of countries the trend continues whereby government officials within national gender/women’s machinery and beyond perceive NGOs and women’s rights advocates as being politically motivated.

12. Despite these challenges, governments continue to rely on NGOs to provide services to women living in the margins, including Roma women, women and girls living with disabilities, refugee and migrant women, LGBTI as well as survivors of gender-based violence and trafficking. Since 2015, national government/NGO partnerships in the region on the prevention and response to gender-based violence are among the most evolved and systematized within the gender equality national agendas. NGOs tend to be the main service providers to survivors of gender-based violence; and academia throughout the region have led on the generation of nationally owned knowledge and analysis on the root causes and prevalence of gender-based violence. In many EU countries, Canada and the United States, governments have a long history of financially subsidizing NGOs to deliver key gender-based violence services. In a few middle-income countries in the region, there is evidence within the last five years of governments funding national NGOs to provide some basic gender-based violence services.

13. The country-level partnerships between the women’s movement¹⁰ and the national gender/women’s machinery are best characterized as historic and long-term, alternating between being mutually supportive and then cycling back to one of antagonist and watch dog. Linked to the women’s movement of a country, informal gender equality national networks – also known as alliances – are important mechanisms through which national-level advocacy is channelled. The work of the alliances and networks tends to focus on reacting to legislative gaps or reforms; the preparation of reports to the regional and global human rights mechanisms pertaining to gender equality; advocating for women’s voice in humanitarian and post-conflict processes; and increasingly, developing monitoring reports on the degree to which certain government commitments towards gender equality and the empowerment of women are being fulfilled. A shrinking civic space in parts of the region in recent years has resulted in the women’s movement at the national level engaging

⁸ UN (1995), *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Mission Statement*, para. 26.

⁹ The National Beijing +25 Reviews provide very few examples of NGOs accessing government funds, excepting mostly in the area of the provision of GBV and anti-trafficking services.

¹⁰ For the purposes of this paper, the term “women’s movement” refers to the collective and cumulative work and dialogue of feminists, activists, NGOs and social/cultural/political leaders to advance the overall realization of gender equality and the empowerment of women in that country.

increasingly with the broader NGO community to advocate for freedom of association, assembly, expression and ending corruption.

14. The last five years have seen an important shift to more strategic investments in building alliances within the women's movement with male champions and men's groups to support gender equality and the empowerment of women in the region. National level work on mobilizing men to advocate for gender equality and the empowerment of women, or to increase national and local level awareness on the root causes of gender-based discrimination has often been leveraged through global partnerships.

15. Leaving no one behind is an increasingly common principle among both government and NGO representatives, and the National Beijing+25 Reviews illustrate some efforts to engage activists and representatives from youth groups and marginalized groups, including LGBTIQ, refugee women, women vulnerable to trafficking and sex-work, and Roma. In many countries in the EU and in Canada, investments are growing to support organizations from these communities to take a more active role within the women's movement. In Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, documentation on the work of these organizations is limited, and some regional monitoring shows that there is limited space or funding being provided to these groups within the broader government/NGO dialogues.

16. In reviewing the partnerships supporting refugee populations – including targeted interventions for women and children – there is improved overall coordination among government institutions since 2015, and improved coordination between government and international humanitarian agencies. The dialogue among and between government, NGO and international organizations on the needs of refugees and populations impacted by emergencies has improved. Nonetheless, further government investment is required in increasing NGO access to the broader discourse and decision-making (including funding allocation) around the nationally driven humanitarian responses.¹¹

B. Partnership with private sector

17. In the United States, Canada and many Western European countries, there has been emerging interest by the private sector in the concept of "Impact Investments" – the "simple idea ... that for-profit investments are both an economically effective and a morally appropriate way to address a social problem."¹² While not a new concept – indeed cooperatives have worked with these principles for generations – over the past ten years, the size of the impact investment model has grown and is now estimated to be at US \$502 billion globally with over 1,300 organizations supporting impact investments, according to the Global Impact Investing Network, a non-profit seeking to remove barriers to social investments.¹³ The rational for many actors in Impact Investments is that it is – first and foremost – an untapped market and business investment, and that better living for conditions for all results in economic growth for all.

18. In a number of countries in the region, with the adoption of the SDGs, private sector/government and NGO dialogue is increasing around the shared responsibilities under Agenda 2030. Businesses throughout the ECE region have signed off on the Women's Empowerment Principles, a set of principles for business offering guidance on how to empower women in the workplace, marketplace and community, and mobilise social responsibility efforts by institutions and organizations, regardless of their scale. The Women's Empowerment Principles include a gap analysis tool developed to provide businesses with a free user-friendly and confidential self-assessment of their performance on

¹¹ UN Women (2016), *Gender Assessment of the Refugee and Migration Crisis in Serbia and FYR Macedonia*, p. 18.

¹² Wharton, University of Pennsylvania (2019), <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/whats-next-for-impact-investing/>.

¹³ Ibid.

gender equality and the empowerment of women. Launched in March 2017, within just one year, 23 percent of all global users of this tool were from the Europe region.¹⁴

C. Regional and international partnerships

19. Regional-level networks and alliances of like-minded organizations working towards common goals in the long-term have been common since 1995, and in the age of social media, are more able to provide advocacy and momentum to national-level work.

20. Regional networks and alliances of marginalized groups such as women living with disabilities, LGBTIQ, refugee women, women living with HIV and AIDS, Roma women, and rural women provide safe spaces for dialogue; build region-wide awareness of their situation; and increase national awareness about the norms and obligations contained in regional and international instruments, including CEDAW, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action and the 2030 Agenda. Trends over the last five years show that the regional networks build knowledge, tools and may also work towards the development of donor-funded programmes to be implemented at the national and local levels. In recent years, however, many networks' outreach has been challenged in large part due to limited sources of funding in the ECE region.

21. The region hosts a broad range of global and regional formal networks supporting national level advocacy and change on gender equality and includes – among others: the European Women's Lobby (EWL); International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and its networks of national NGOs throughout ECE; Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE); the European Network of Migrant Women; Women in Black for Justice Against War; the AIDS Foundation East West (AFEW); the European Network for Women in Leadership; European Coalition to End Violence against Women and Girls (established through the European Women's Lobby); European Romani Women's Movement under the International Roma Women's Network; the European Youth Network; the OSCE Central Asian Youth Network; and the Gender Information Network of the Southern Caucasus to name a few. This is only a sampling of the regional and sub-regional networks and alliances which have emerged over time. One challenge noted is that with a few exceptions, the majority have not documented the impact of their work, particularly on national level realities.

22. Some lessons learned from successful regional networks and alliances in the ECE region indicate that sharing a common and very focused goal which crosses all contexts is essential (i.e. HIV/AIDS; sexual and reproductive health and rights; migrant women). Often, momentum is sustained through the establishment or appointment of an organization which is resourced to coordinate the regional network/alliance and keep it going beyond time-bound and specific actions. Regional networks have benefited from well-established linkages with global organizations and networks. These relationships result in learnings, adaptation of tools from other regions, and financial support. These global relationships have also helped regional networks identify national partners.

23. In reviewing the emerging youth networks, the trends in the ECE region reflect those in many other regions – namely, that youth activism plays out first through internet-based spaces such as social media, blogs, and on-line forums. These often region-wide mechanisms provide a platform for diverse dialogue in a region which is seeing increasing polarization of views, as well as help mobilise young people to formulate national-level action and to speak out against social injustices in their countries in a safe forum.

24. The ECE region has been influential in recent years in shaping the global dialogues on human rights and gender equality and the empowerment of women through intergovernmental forums convened by the UN. Regional norms and standards on gender equality have also been fostered and developed, as well as monitored, through regional organizations and bodies such as the EU and the EC, the CoE, and the OSCE. Further, and

¹⁴ UN Global Compact/UN Women/IDB/Multilateral Investment Fund, (2018), *Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPS) Global Trends Report 2018*, pp. 2-3.

primarily within the EU, there is a continued trend of national and local governments having cross-border partnerships around gender equality and the empowerment of women.

25. Often through the support of EU Member States and EU institutions, the UN has extensive partnerships at the regional and national level with intergovernmental bodies, national government institutions and NGOs around gender equality and the empowerment of women. These partnerships have focused primarily on: provision of technical support to governments and NGOs in shaping policy and service standards at the national level to ensure reflection of international and regional commitments, norms and standards on gender equality and the empowerment of women; fostering dialogues among and between government, NGOs and also private sector to advance gender equality; supporting and advocating for the gender mainstreaming in broader development, humanitarian and post-conflict processes and policies; and strengthened monitoring and data on the status of gender equality at the national level, including enhanced reporting around the international conventions, standards, resolutions and declarations (i.e. CEDAW, Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN Security Council Resolutions, SDGs, ICPD, and the Beijing Platform for Action); and supporting increased coordination among international (including donor) organizations.

III. Progress in partnerships, alliances and networks

A. National progress

26. As captured above, it is primarily in the area of gender-based violence where partnerships among government institutions and with NGOs at the national level has gained the most traction across the region. In the case of the EU, several countries reported continuing coordination with government and NGOs to ensure implementation of national and local policies and services around gender-based violence. For example, in 2015, the Government of Austria supported over 130 partners to conduct anti-violence work. In the case of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, many National Beijing Platform for Action +25 Reviews stressed the increased coordination among key government departments in the development and adoption of harmonized case referral and harmonized monitoring systems since 2015. Through partnerships between and among NGOs (civil society, women's rights advocates, academia, media) and national gender/women's machinery, information and awareness raising campaigns on gender-based violence, its prevalence, root causes, and survivor rights and services continue to be carried out. Through these partnerships, some countries in South-Eastern Europe and the CIS are seeing increased and voluntary adoption by media of codes of conduct and reporting guidelines to support the appropriate, informed and survivor-friendly reporting by the national media. Much of the coordinated work around gender-based violence response in South-Eastern Europe, the CIS, Caucasus, and Central Asia is made possible through the financial, technical and convening support of multilateral organizations and global philanthropic organizations.

27. A key area of progress in the partnerships among government bodies at the national level is in the use of gender mainstreaming tools, and gender responsive budgeting. For some EU Member States with a history of gender mainstreaming, these last five years saw a continuation of partnership building around the use of gender responsive budgeting tools. In parts of South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, and primarily due to the financial and technical investment of international organizations, the last five years saw extensive achievements through the establishment of key partnerships and deepening capacities. Ministries of Finance in some countries are now the main partners of gender responsive budgeting programmes, along-side the national gender/women's machinery which are typically relegated to the margins of government discussions around national budgets. Through building capacities of local authorities, members of parliament and NGOs on gender responsive budgeting tools, national gender/women's machinery and ministries of finance have fostered partnerships with these three groups in using the tools and policies in support of gender responsive budgeting. NGOs – many working with the most vulnerable groups in

the country - have deepened their capacities in these countries to utilize those tools and have supported the inclusion of often marginalized women's voices in budget and policy processes, resulting in some initial inroads in ensuring that the needs of marginalized groups are taken into account during budget planning processes. NGOs have come together in partnership to develop "watch dog" reports on government accountability to gender equality and the empowerment of women, using gender-responsive budgeting analytical tools to identify progress and challenges.¹⁵

28. The enhanced monitoring of the status of gender equality and the empowerment of women at the national level has resulted in a significant increase in partnerships between the national gender/women's machinery and the national statistical offices. The adoption of the SDGs, and the nationally-driven processes of identifying data sources for all targets, alongside the compiling of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), has provided the national gender/women's machinery important leverage in strengthening the necessary partnerships with the national statistical offices, as well as often powerful key line ministries and government bodies tasked with oversight of national development plans and the SDGs.

29. From the establishment of the Public Council on Gender in Ukraine, which is aimed at unifying and coordinating the efforts of members of parliament, civil society and international organizations to promote and advance gender equality, to the work of the informal group of women members of parliament in Kyrgyzstan in supporting the adoption of sector-based regulatory and legal acts that promote gender mainstreaming in all government activities, countries throughout the region have seen an increase in investments in the partnerships and networks among women members of parliament at the national level.

30. The last five years have seen an increase in the number of non-traditional partnerships in support of gender equality, particularly in assisting women from vulnerable groups or in vulnerable situations. As a means of supporting women from minority groups, through a joint partnership with local authorities, language schools and NGOs, the Government of Denmark is providing free-teaching modules on themes such as gender equality in the labour market, in public life and within families. In the Netherlands, to address the "loverboy" phenomena¹⁶, the national federation of youth welfare organizations and the National Youth Institute came together to form the "Azough Commission" to prevent further cases, and to link the work to the overall anti-trafficking initiatives supported by the Government. In Italy, through partnerships with a broad range of government institutions and labour market associations, support is being provided to facilitate labour market access for vulnerable migrant women and integrates within the partnerships a peer-mentoring among local government officials on how to identify victims of human trafficking.

31. There have been more investments in engaging with men. The global campaign #HeForShe (UN Women) has been rolled out in a number of countries through a Government/NGO and men's champion alliance. There are also trends of national partnerships with two global alliances/networks – Men Engage, a global alliance of national networks, civil societies and UN agencies working towards gender equality; and Promundo, a global consortium with members world-wide, working to advance men's engagement in gender equality and the empowerment of women. A good practice in terms of masculinities and the Public-Private partnership is seen in Georgia, where a study conducted by the Institute of Social Studies and Analysis looked at men's time use and roles in unpaid care work. In 2016, Georgia joined the MenCare Global Campaign in 2016, supported by UNFPA, the NGO We Care, Promundo, the Government of Sweden, the Georgian Football Federation and FC Locomotive. The campaign's focus has been to increase understanding

¹⁵ UN Women (2019), *Fact Sheet – Gender Responsive Budgeting: Highlights from the UN Women Regional Programme for South East Europe and the Republic of Moldova*.

¹⁶ Loverboy refers to a young man who seduces one or more girls with (apparent) affection and gifts, before forcing them into prostitution. (Reference: National Beijing+25 Report Netherlands (2019), p. 61.

around masculinities, increasing men's share of unpaid care work in the home, and working together to end all forms of gender-based violence including sexual violence.¹⁷

32. Continuing in the area of public-private partnerships, the Women's Empowerment Principles are gaining traction throughout the ECE region. Detailed best practices, however, are yet to be well documented region wide. Through the UN Global Compact Women's Empowerment Working Group for Turkey/UN Women partnerships, Turkey has developed a detailed Implementation Guide to the Women's Empowerment Principles. This guide assists the 283 companies in Turkey which have signed on to the Principles, making Turkey first in Women's Empowerment Principles signatory companies globally.¹⁸ Several companies that signed the Women's Empowerment Principles in Turkey within the last three years have also started implementing concrete initiatives to promote gender equality, zero tolerance for violence against women and women's leadership. Among some signatories, plans for child-care services (in-office or subsidies) and measures to be more LGBTIQ sensitive were initiated, to be implemented in 2019.

33. In Denmark, public-private partnerships in recent years has been focused on promoting gender equality in education – overcoming gender stereotypes in primary and lower secondary schools, enhancing girls and young women's interest in STEM education. In Georgia, the adoption of an e-learning course for the prevention of sexual harassment in the workplace was launched in 2017 by the government, with international support. Although the course is designed primarily for civil servants, the private telecommunications company GeoCell has committed to using the e-course internally. In Kazakhstan, joint stock companies, in partnership with state financial bodies and national development fund institutions are implementing a joint project funded by the European Investment Bank which focuses on offering capacity development to women – including rural women – on how to start-up businesses which promote and use green technologies.

B. Regional progress

34. The European Women's Lobby continues to be one of the most active networks in the ECE region as well as the largest, representing more than 2,000 organizations in both the EU as well as candidate countries¹⁹. Bringing together civil society, women's rights advocates and leaders, in facilitating these partnerships and dialogue, the European Women's Lobby focuses on influencing public opinion and advocating for change within EU institutions. Under their 50:50 Women for Europe - Europe for Women campaign in 2018-2019, region-wide actions were supported to both mobilise increased support for women in the European Parliamentary elections of 2019, as well as to increase support for more women to be appointed to senior level decision-making positions in the EU's institutions. Since 2015, through the European Women's Lobby partnerships, they have increased understanding on the reality of online violence facing many women running in politics in the region; the importance of mobilising young women feminists, including supporting a summer camp in 2018 for young women from participating countries in the region; to building peace, supporting the voice of refugee and migrant women, and fostering women's economic empowerment.

35. Recent years have seen some important advances in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights and services in part because of regional networks linking with national initiatives pushing forward some core aspects of SDG 3 on health and SDG 5 on gender equality, and the Beijing Platform for Action requirements therein. The International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network (IPPF EN) provides sexual and reproductive health services and creates an enabling environment for improved access to and quality by supporting region-wide coordinated advocacy. In the last five years, through technical and financial support by the network, its national member organizations

¹⁷ UNFPA and ECE (2018), *Fulfilling the Potential of Present and Future Generations: Report on ICPD Programme of Action (+25) Implementation in the ECE Region*, pp. 86-87

¹⁸ UN Women and the Global Compact Network, (2017), Turkey, *Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) Implementation Guide: Equality Means Business*, pp. 13-14

¹⁹ European Women's Lobby website: <https://womentobby.org>

supported governments to bring about 196 successful policy initiatives/legislative changes in support of sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality and the empowerment of women. “These include: broader eligibility criteria to access medically assisted reproduction (Portugal, Sweden, Lithuania); budget allocation for subsidized/free contraceptives for vulnerable groups and young people (Kazakhstan, France); legislation combating forced and early marriage (Kyrgyzstan); and legislative changes improving the quality (Georgia) and accessibility (France, Albania) of abortion services. International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network also contributed greatly to the introduction and provision of sexuality and relationship education across the region, documenting obstacles that young people belonging to key populations are facing in accessing HIV and sexual and reproductive health services. Collaboration with these young people resulted in a practical tool ‘Health, Rights and Well-Being’ and country-level actions to empower them to claim their rights and help prevent discrimination and stigma”.²⁰

36. The work of the AIDS Foundation East West (AFEW) Network is made up of member organizations and over 160 local partners in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The network and its partners remain committed to supporting those living with or affected by HIV, tuberculosis, viral hepatitis and other public health concerns. Since 2015, and in partnership with both government and NGOs, AFEW has supported national level progress in increasing equitable access to essential HIV, hepatitis C and tuberculosis prevention, treatment and care services for marginalized communities. Focus has also been in developing the capacities of key populations so that their voices may be heard. Importantly, AFEW is also investing in promoting innovative leadership and approaches, and the sharing of evidence-based best practices and technical, clinical and medical knowledge and expertise to support civil society and governments. In recent years, through the work in Tajikistan, the AFEW Network supported local governments to start the first community-based HIV testing facility, and through sharing this experience throughout civil society, there are now seven community-based counselling and testing sites in country. In Kazakhstan, the AFEW Network developed a mobile application (POZ.INFO) to help people living with HIV to adhere to treatment. In the Russian Federation, the AFEW Network is supporting an NGO that reaches out to people who inject drugs and offers clean needles and syringes. It provides care for minor medical problems such as sores or small injuries and refers people for HIV testing and to medical specialists.²¹

37. The role of the UN region-wide in strengthening alliance building and coordination between governments, NGOs and the international community has continued. Increasingly, the focus of the UN regionally under the overall framework of advancing the SDGs, is ensuring region specific knowledge and platforms around gender equality trends in the region; and, how marginalized groups are being treated. Since 2015, the UN has significantly increased investments in enhanced UN coordination at the regional level, including the establishment of a region-wide, 14 agency member Issue-Based Coalition on Gender Equality (IBC-Gender). Its main goal is to ensure a coordinated UN system approach to promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment in the region, specifically around achieving the SDGs. The main results include a consolidated support to countries to engender their national policy and legal frameworks, providing interagency gender expertise and knowledge to address emerging gender priorities and joint advocacy on gender equality and women’s rights.²²

²⁰ UNFPA and ECE (2018), ICPD +25 Regional Review, p. 61.

²¹ Ibid, p. 72.

²² For more information on the IBC-Gender, see www.unece.org/runcwelcome/issue-based-coalitions/gender-equality.html.

IV. Challenges

A. Environment for national partnerships

38. National gender/women's machinery and national mechanisms to monitor Human Rights are often significantly under-staffed, under-financed, and in some countries in the region, legislatively or otherwise have faced impediments in terms of being effective bodies to advocate for a robust human rights framework in the country. This trend has continued over the last five years, with national gender/women's machinery facing significant resource constraints.

39. As mentioned, the limited financing results in NGOs not being able to invest in long-term, strategic alliances but rather focus on ensuring the work of their organisation continues, often through resources gained via short-term, project-based funding opportunities. These efforts detract from partnership and alliance building; or result in ad hoc alliances which are often reactive rather than strategic or long-term. Further, an essential component of success for any alliance aimed at creating social change is to have a finely tuned communications strategy and skills – something which not all women's rights advocates or NGOs in country may have had the resources to invest in developing.

40. A key area of concern for NGOs is the limited space for constructive, two-way dialogue with government institutions. Often, public consultations may be held but these take the form of information sessions more so than dialogue, and women's NGOs across the region feel that their inputs, concerns and perspectives are not factored in – particularly when representing the voice of marginalized groups.²³ Importantly for both women's NGOs and national gender/women's machinery, they are not always afforded genuine, consultative access to policies in key sectors shaping macroeconomic policies, sustainable development, disaster risk management and resilience, energy conservation, to name but a few key policies under the SDGs and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

41. The overall enabling environment supporting NGO operations has witnessed a decline in parts of the region, and as mentioned, this directly impacts the freedoms of assembly, association and expression which foster partnerships, alliances and networks. With the rise in inequalities and increased polarization of societies throughout the region, the issue of freedom of expression, assembly and association continues to be as relevant now as it was in 1995 when the drafters of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action observed with concern globally “....in some countries, Governments continue to restrict the ability of NGOs to operate freely.”²⁴ In addition, it remains essential to closely involve and strengthen partnerships with women's human rights defenders and their movements in working towards gender equality and women's empowerment.

42. Restriction of NGOs in parts of the region is taking multiple forms – it can be legal and administrative barriers put forward by the state in terms of registration, reporting, and in receiving funds; judicial harassment and sanctions, including criminal prosecution; smear campaigns; threats and intimidation and even physical violence.²⁵ Among CoE member states, recent years have seen challenges in the rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression, despite these being guaranteed by law in most countries. These challenges include an increase in the smear campaigns, judicial, administrative and fiscal harassment for NGOs in parts of the region, particularly those working on human rights, governance and anti-corruption.²⁶ On freedom of expression, the region has seen increased aggression and physical attacks on journalists increasing. While these statistics reference journalists, the implications for “new” media – such as on-line bloggers – and for civil society in those countries is considerable. Such intimidation at minimum leads to self-censorship, and in the worst case, targeting of individuals by populist and sometimes state forces. Of great

²³ CIVICUS, (2016), *Civic Space in Europe Survey*, p. 9.

²⁴ UN (1995). *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Mission Statement*. para. 26.

²⁵ Report of the Secretary General of the CoE (2018), p. 56.

²⁶ Report of the Secretary General of the CoE (2017), pp. 7-8.

concern throughout the region is that “subjective blocking of online content and problems related to the lack of transparency of media ownership are also troubling”.²⁷ On-line platforms are essential to engage and ensure ownership of human rights advocacy by the youth, to ensure voice and outreach to persons often marginalized or facing multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination, and to ensure all persons are made aware of their rights and opportunities for redress. On-line forums support regional/cross-border exchanges and learning as well.

43. The degree to which the above environment is impacting NGOs across the region varies based on the subregion. The CoE monitors this, and so it is possible to compare the situation across its member States. That is not to say, however, that similar challenges are not being faced in the other sub-regions of ECE. A recent survey of civil society organizations for Western, Central, Eastern and Southern Europe found that overall conditions for civil society and citizen action are rated above average by 41 percent of respondents; and below average by 41 percent of respondents; with 58.7 percent of respondents saying the situation has worsened in the last year (2016). Survey findings reiterated those of the CoE listed above. However, it is notable that in trust of freedom of association, freedom of expression, and rights to protection, Central, Eastern and Southern Europe respondents always showed significantly lower levels of confidence and worsened situations than of their counterparts in Western Europe.²⁸

B. Insufficient engagement with marginalized groups

44. In ensuring the full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – and through this, the SDGs – the limited availability of disaggregated data for marginalized populations remains a continued challenge in many countries throughout the ECE region. There is considerable on-line evidence that via social media, youth, LGBTIQ, and ethnic minorities are carving out space and dialogue. Indeed, many national-level reviews for Beijing+25 capture the need to encourage the participation of all these groups, and in particular, youth under the Leaving No One Behind principle. The challenge remains documenting the impact of this social dialogue.

45. Trends show that NGOs representing marginalized groups in many countries in the region face significant challenges in accessing financing. For many marginalized groups, accessing government-run services and support is challenging due to a myriad of factors – lack of knowledge about the services, language limitations, lack of documentation, lack of funds, and for many groups, an overall lack of trust in government institutions. Region-wide surveys and analysis conducted jointly by UNDP, the EC and the World Bank on the situation of Roma communities in the Balkans illustrate these limitations. Investing in generating evidence to support Roma advocates for greater inclusion of Roma voices into policy making, these researches are key in closing the data gap mentioned above. The data shows that although some progress has been achieved since 2011, Roma remain an excluded community.²⁹ Folding within the research substantive analysis of gender-based violence and early marriage among the Roma communities, the findings show that trust of partnerships with official government institutions is limited among the Roma community and NGOs have therefore been “instrumental in securing services for Roma women from state institutions and in improving the quality of services”, including acting as an interlocuter for Roma women surviving gender-based violence and early marriage who do approach government institutions for support.³⁰

²⁷ Report of the Secretary General of the CoE (2018), p. 5.

²⁸ CIVICUS (2016), *Civic Space in Europe Survey*, pp. 5-8.

²⁹ For more details, see the UNDP-World Bank – European Commission Regional Roma Survey Results (2011 and 2017): www.eurasia.undp.org/content/rbec/en/home/library/roma/regional-roma-survey-2017-country-fact-sheets.html.

³⁰ Milenković, N., UNDP, (2018), *Nowhere to turn - Gender-based violence against Roma women: Report of a Field Study of Roma Communities in Albania, Montenegro and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, p. 3.

46. Partnerships in support of refugee women is evolving but faces considerable challenges. There is need for improved coordination and partnership among humanitarian actors (international, government and non-governmental organizations) in systemic protection monitoring, gender-based violence prevention and response services, targeted psychosocial support and trauma counselling, women-only spaces, and full-time gynaecological services on site in transit and reception centres.³¹. Recent gender assessments of humanitarian responses in South-Eastern Europe has found that both governments and the UN have not invested sufficient internal resources to ensure gender equality and the empowerment of women is mainstreamed within humanitarian response plans and monitoring of impact of investment. National gender/women's machinery have played a limited role in shaping the government's response to humanitarian needs and also have an important role to play as advocates for gender equality in this regard, but have not been provided sufficient access to the decision-making processes.³²

V. Priority actions

47. Based on the findings of this review, the following priority actions on enhancing partnerships and alliances for gender equality and the empowerment of women in the ECE region are recommended:

- a. Develop progressive partnership strategies in an open and transparent manner to bring together state and non-state actors and development partners to jointly protect, promote and monitor gender equality and women's human rights, in conformity with regional and international standards. Align policies and programmes with the principles of the Beijing Platform for Actions and 2030 Agenda with a focus on expanded partnership to bring transformative changes for gender equality and women's empowerment from Leaving No One Behind perspectives;
- b. Strengthen partnership with national gender/women's machineries and human rights mechanisms with access to reliable, systematic and sufficient financial and human resources supported with innovative practices and solutions;
- c. Strengthen partnership with state institutions on legislation and procedures governing freedom of association and freedom of expression reflecting regional and international standards, including those related to alliances and public movements to advocate for gender equality and women's rights, across the region;
- d. Strengthen partnership with the private sector in each country with collective actions to implement the Women Empowerment Principles (WEPs) and international gender equality commitments;
- e. Develop and introduce clear terms and criteria for public-private partnerships to promote gender equality at the regional and national levels;
- f. Develop partnership with digital enterprises to protect and promote free and conducive online spaces to improve women's and girls' access to technologies and digital spaces;
- g. Partner with governments, to build safe and enabling environments for women human rights defenders and their movements to promote gender equality and protect human rights³³;
- h. Develop government/NGOs partnership that includes under-represented and marginalized groups as equal development partners and actors of change;

³¹ UN Women (2016), *Gender Assessment of the Refugee and Migration Crisis in Serbia and FYR Macedonia*, p. 3

³² Ibid. p. 18

³³ UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders (January 2019), p. 16-18

- i. Increase and scale up a partnership and financial support for women's organizations to meaningfully engage in policy advocacy at the global, regional and national levels;
 - j. Private and bilateral donors, as well as international organizations, to increase access to knowledge, best practices and financial resources to deliver internationally agreed gender commitments and targets;
 - k. Strengthen partnership of inter-generational partners with young women and youth organizations and networks to the create greater civic space for youth from all groups of society to represent their own voices and concerns;
 - l. Provide coordinated support to marginalized groups (minority and Roma communities, refugee and migrant communities, persons living with disabilities, elderly, LGBTIQ communities, people living with HIV, etc.) for their active engagement and representation in SDGs implementation and monitoring by addressing the intersecting forms of discrimination;
 - m. Expand partnerships between governments, NGOs and international organizations for targeted gender responsive interventions for refugee women by investing within these organizations' own structures to ensure sufficient capacity to mainstream gender equality measures within humanitarian responses and monitor impact of these investments.
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