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Statement

by

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at the

Regional Civil Society Forum

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Dear colleagues and friends,

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome all of you, fellow gender champions, to today's Regional Civil Society Forum. The energy and momentum you bring to the Beijing+25 Regional Review Meeting will be critical, just as it was in 1995. At the Fourth World Conference on Women, thirty thousand non-governmental activists – about 60 times as many as we are in this room today – united in Beijing to push for more gender equality. While representatives of 189 governments negotiated over the exact wording of the declaration, non-governmental activists joined forces in a parallel Forum and kept the pressure on.

Since then, much has changed. Over the last two decades, processes at the UN have become more inclusive. Instead of attending parallel forums, civil society representatives increasingly have a seat at the negotiation table. The process leading to the 2030 Agenda is a good example of a more transparent, consultative and inclusive approach.

The role of civil society has also changed. Information and communication technologies have created spaces of influence, leading to a significant growth of online civil society activity. These networks jointly tackle social challenges, regardless of geographical distance. With the 500 people in this room, we might easily reach an online community of tens of thousands of people across the UNECE region and beyond.

While the context has changed, many of the challenges addressed in Beijing

remain. It is alarming how many of the commitments that were formulated in 1995 are still applicable today. Women continue to earn less, remain under-represented among managers and parliamentarians, continue to do more domestic and care work than men. But let me be clear: this is not a fight by women for women. This is a societal transformation led by those who believe in equality for all. It is a process that will benefit everyone. Let me take this opportunity to extend my special welcome to all men in the room. We need you here.

The Beijing Declaration clearly stresses the following: “The participation and contribution of all actors of civil society, with full respect for their autonomy, in cooperation with Governments, are important to the effective implementation and follow-up of the Platform for Action.”

Your engagement and your continuous efforts to shape more equitable societies are critical to turn the Beijing Declaration from a visionary agenda to a lived reality. One conviction unites us all, and that is that we can no longer accept inequalities based on sex. In the forthcoming days of the Regional Review Meeting, you will have the opportunity to point out the remaining and emerging new challenges. You have earned your right to criticize by your willingness to engage. To truly make advancements, we not only need your constructive criticism, but we also need your solutions. Pose the right questions - but also give us words for answers. Be prepared to not only point out what needs to be changed - give us ideas and inspiration for making gender equality a reality now. The more concrete your inputs and suggestions, the more likely it is that you will inspire policymakers.

While your energetic voices are critical to promote gender equality in our region, we all know that your engagement has not become easier. In some parts of our region, we see the space for civil society shrinking. Let me be clear: I strongly believe that governments and citizens benefit from a strong and dynamic civil society. Governments and non-governmental organizations should work as partners, not opponents. We can prove in the coming days that partnerships can get us where we need to be.

Our target is set forth not only in the Beijing Declaration but also in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. There can be no sustainable development in the absence of gender equality. When we discuss the commitments of 1995, we should always keep in mind our political promises for 2030.

Before I conclude, let me thank the organizers of this Forum. We know that the past months and weeks have been hectic, but the success of your efforts is already visible: you have mobilized an impressive number of gender advocates. We need all of you here. Gender equality is everyone's issue. Let us use the three days ahead to push for more equal societies.

Thank you.
