



UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development Peer Learning Round Table on SDG 5: Gender Equality

Panel on Population Dynamics, Scaling Up Promising Practices, and Building Partnerships

2 April 2025, Geneva

Dear delegates and fellow participants,

My name is Elina Turalyeva and I speak on behalf of the Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism, and will address the question of **significant barriers** and **innovative approaches** to achieve gender equality.

This is a **defining moment** for gender equality in our region. The challenges we face are **not new**, but they have **deepened – economic and social crises, conflicts**, and a **growing anti-rights tide**. These crises **will** continue as anti-gender actors redirect social and climate funding to militarisation.

Our feminist movements are increasingly constructed as the “enemy”. We see this in the **budget cuts** to gender equality programmes, the **visa restrictions on trans activists** who are now finding it even more difficult to attend spaces such as this forum, and the **criminalisation of freedom of assembly and organising**. We are not the enemy. But we are, proudly, a threat to violent patriarchal and colonial systems.

This year in Kyrgyzstan, where I am from, we celebrate 100 years since the women’s rights movement started and we were the only Central Asian country able to have a peaceful march against femicide. In 2023, law enforcement agencies registered more than 13 thousand cases of domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan. 75% of femicide cases are by an intimate partner, a male family member or friend. Imagine coming home and not feeling safe because you may be killed by your partner? **There are no safe spaces for women in Central Asia facing gender based violence.** He will find you, stalk you and kill you. That is our reality.

Agenda 2030 is a measure of the daily realities of millions. We must act decisively to remove **structural inequalities** and **systemic barriers**. There is no other way to achieve equality without changing the system itself.

We must be steadfast on the principle of **Leave No One Behind** to ensure that solutions include the most marginalised communities. We cannot continue business as usual. Our region is diverse, but we contain the concentration of many colonial countries and their neo-colonial enterprises that continue to this day. The EU's commitment to "green growth" continues to uphold colonial extractivism and posits the climate crisis as a technological problem to be "solved". This reliance on endless growth is dependent on feminised, invisibilised and racialised labour. At the same time, "vital new technologies" remain **patriarchal** and **racist**, with women, girls and LGBTI+ communities in all their diversity **shut out from digital spaces** and **increasingly facing online gender based violence**.

We therefore must urgently take legal steps to address online spaces that amplify hate, anti-gender rhetoric, and climate denialism, where AI is being weaponized against democracy and women's rights. Without accountability, technology will continue to reinforce bias rather than challenge it. Rather than allowing AI and digital platforms to perpetuate harm, we must decolonise and decommodefy **technology as a Tool for Equity!**

Member States must **regulate tech giants**, implement **safe digital spaces**, and establish **digital gender-based violence helplines**.

Media literacy, digital skills, and ICT education should be embedded in school curricula and community programs. Parents must be involved in digital literacy initiatives to protect children from online threats. And we must promote specifically **women in STEM**.

What we also need, more than ever, is **to invest in the Care Economy**. Women carry the burden of unpaid care, doing three times more unpaid care work than men.

War and destruction makes this worse, as we hear from our colleagues in Ukraine, where women are holding up society despite the mass displacement and bombardments – by educating, producing food, looking after the ill and wounded. Women must have a seat at the table during peace negotiations.

At our current rate, it will take an estimated 268 years to close the economic gender gap. We need all Member States to implement policies such as **equal parental leave**, and **universal access to childcare and older persons care** and shorter work

weeks to redistribute unpaid labour and stimulate economic participation.

More than ever, we have to stand up for bodily autonomy to secure **legal protections for Sexual and Reproductive Rights**, for example, in France, where the right to abortion is enshrined in the constitution! We need comprehensive sexuality education in schools, legislation against **child marriage**, and Member States must secure **SRHR funding** as a cornerstone of gender equality. Without this, progress will remain stalled.

Gender equality is not about integrating women into patriarchal systems – it is about **transforming our systems**. We must halt the influence of patriarchal masculinity on young boys and men, instead engaging **men and boys as agents of change**, shifting from **harmful** gender norms towards a positive, feminist **and ecological masculinity that centres care**.

For this we need **real intersectional approaches**. **Intersectionality is not a buzzword that can be used by governments while DEI and financial support are cut**. Establishing advisory councils that ensure **young, rural, LGBTI, and migrant voices** are included in decision-making is vital.

Finally, LGBTI and feminist movements are at the forefront of upholding democracy in the region. We need renewed commitment to the **OHCHR's Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the Aarhus Convention**, to ensure we can continue to fight for system change.

First they come for us, and then they will come for everyone else who said nothing.

Thank you.