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Renewing the Global Architecture for Gender Equality

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Introduction

Despite decades of effort, national governments and international institutions have fallen short in pursuing gender equality. There has been a growing awareness of the pervasive barriers women and girls face, as well as the societal, economic, and security benefits that flow from increasing gender equality. Yet most women and girls remain significantly underrepresented in the global workforce and in public and political life, particularly at senior levels. They also suffer disproportionate rates of violence and poverty, poor health and education outcomes, and lack of access to rights and justice. The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated global economic downturn have exacerbated those problems. The World Economic Forum recently estimated in its 2021 Global Gender Gap report that it will now take 135.6 years to reach gender parity worldwide, up from 99.5 years in its 2020 report.¹

In recent years, efforts have been made to strengthen the global architecture aimed at advancing gender equality and gender equity. Gender equality is the same treatment of all people regardless of gender identity. Gender equity refers to the creation of conditions of fairness that take into consideration the diversity of all people across all genders and identities—not despite their gender, but in response to their gender.² Although some important progress has been made—particularly related to reducing maternal mortality and increasing the number of girls enrolled in primary school—those efforts, including the establishment of UN Women in 2010, have largely failed to catalyze widespread and sustained change.³ To address this problem, some policy experts have proposed establishing new institutions and new initiatives, particularly outside the UN system and beyond the UN Women–convened Generation Equality Forum.

New good-faith efforts to foster gender equality should be welcomed and could add meaningful value. However, repeated efforts to redesign the international architecture risk duplication, distract from the implementation of existing initiatives, and compound a sense that reforms are launched without sufficient follow-through or funding. The reality is that many efforts have failed and current institutions underperformed because of inadequate political will, unclear objectives, burdensome reporting requirements, and insufficient resources. In addition, much of the work to advance gender equality is often siloed; for example, efforts to improve the availability and quality of schools must often be accompanied by efforts to address widespread gender-based violence, which prevents girls from accessing and completing education.⁴ According to estimates, approximately sixty million girls are sexually assaulted on their way to or at school every year.⁵ Rising nationalism, entrenched misogynistic leaders, increasing rates of gender-based violence, and backsliding on gender equality due to the COVID-19 crisis have presented additional challenges.

Establishing new institutions will not solve these problems and instead risks compounding them. The existing architecture and ambitious initiatives, including the Generation Equality Forum, can deliver results. To make that happen, countries such as the United States need to lead by example, unequivocally embracing gender equality as a priority, supporting existing institutions explicitly designed to address disparities, and putting substantial resources behind meaningful policy and legal changes. Within that context, reforms and additions to the international architecture should be additive instead of duplicative.

The Case for Addressing Gender Inequality

Ample research and recent history show that societies that invest in achieving gender equality are more peaceful, healthy, and prosperous. Conversely, societies with significant levels of gender inequality—either by design or because of inaction—fuel poverty, health insecurity, and extremism; moreover, they undermine vital work on global issues ranging from conflict resolution to the climate crisis.

Yet gender equality is too often treated like a niche issue, highlighted periodically at international conferences and not prioritized by the majority of those with political and economic power once the conferences end. There is a chasm between rhetoric and implementation; leaders often say they are committed to achieving gender equality but rarely undertake the difficult work necessary to make it a reality. For those concerned with democracy, stability, security, and prosperity, closing the gap between recognizing gender equality's benefits and acting upon the issue should take priority.

Consider just a few examples. Women are on the front lines of climate change, as they are more likely to be responsible for farming, gathering water and materials for fuel, and taking care of families in communities that will have to adapt to a more volatile climate. Women are more likely to live in poverty than men, which makes them more vulnerable to climate change, including extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and displacement. Women are also a critical part of the solution. Research has shown that countries where women enjoy a higher political status have lower carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions per capita.⁶ Furthermore, one of the most powerful ways to reduce emissions is by slowing population growth, and one of the most effective ways to do that is to improve women and girls' access to education.⁷ Finally, women are more likely to make better choices to help their local communities with mitigation and adaptation, sharing information related to community well-being, choosing less polluting energy sources, and adapting more easily to environmental changes when their family's survival is at stake.⁸

Higher levels of gender equality are directly related to increased levels of security and stability. Research has shown that countries with greater gender equality are more likely to resolve conflict without violence and are less likely to use military force to resolve international disputes. Conversely, countries with more significant gender gaps are more likely to be involved in inter- and intrastate conflict.⁹ Women are also essential to building a more lasting peace post-conflict. Women's participation increases the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least two years by 20 percent and a peace agreement lasting fifteen years by 35 percent.¹⁰

Finally, women are critical to COVID-19 adaptation and recovery efforts. Women have been hit disproportionately hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. They have been on the front lines of caring for those suffering from the virus, not only within their own families but in their communities, as they account for approximately 70 percent of the workforce in health and care institutions worldwide.¹¹ Women have endured increasing gender-based violence throughout the pandemic, often finding themselves trapped in abusive situations without access to resources.¹² They have also largely shouldered the growing burden of unpaid care work—particularly as schools have closed—forcing

many out of the workforce and millions into extreme poverty. A report by UN Women and the UN Development Program (UNDP) estimates that the pandemic forced 47 million women and girls into extreme poverty—defined as living on less than US\$1.90 a day.¹³ Consequently, addressing gender inequality is vital to a more effective recovery. A July 2020 report by McKinsey & Company found that if no action is taken to address women’s disproportionate job losses during the COVID-19 pandemic, global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2030 could be reduced by \$1 trillion.¹⁴

What the Current Architecture Looks Like

The current international architecture for gender equality is principally within the UN system—the core of which is the UN Entity for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment, also known as UN Women. UN Women was established in 2010, after an intensive advocacy campaign by civil society, to serve as a “driver” toward meeting women and girls’ needs worldwide. Four UN entities, including the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), were merged during its formation.¹⁵

The United Nations is also home to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), which focuses on ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health care, as well as the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the UNDP, both of which carry out important gender-related work.

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the main intergovernmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality, also sits at the United Nations. CSW is housed within the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and holds annual meetings where nation-states and others, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), gather to evaluate progress and set objectives for achieving gender equality. UN Women directly supports the work of CSW.

The UN Human Rights Council houses the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, an independent body of experts that oversees compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), an international treaty to improve women’s rights. The United Nations is also home to the Spotlight Initiative, a joint effort between the United Nations and the European Union to end gender-based violence. Coordination on gender issues is carried out through the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE), the “single largest network of gender focal points in the UN system, including sixty representatives from UN offices and departments, specialized agencies, funds and programs.”¹⁶ The IANWGE is chaired by UN Women.

The UN structure is complemented by the work of other multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); the Group of Twenty (G20) and Group of Seven (G7), which recently established a gender equality advisory council; country-based initiatives such as Canada’s Gender Equality Fund; philanthropic institutions; NGOs; civil-society organizations (CSOs); and feminist, youth, LGBTQ+, racial justice, and other movements.

This institutional architecture has become the main source of data, equality gap definitions, and the advances made to date. However, recent backsliding on gender equality and the upcoming 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) deadline require new urgency. To accelerate progress, there must be a redoubling of investment and a revitalization of existing institutions and initiatives for promoting gender equality, starting with UN Women and Generation Equality.

Long Past Time to Invest in UN Women

Although UN Women is only one part of an extensive gender architecture, it was intended to be its focal point. Created by the UN General Assembly after years of deliberation and advocacy by civil society, UN Women has unique reach. Other multilateral forums and national efforts are vital, but the actions of a handful of like-minded nations through institutions such as the G7 inherently lack the inclusivity and mandate to advocate for and support gender equality efforts, particularly those involving rights, in every region.

UN Women was established with the enthusiastic support of hundreds of civil-society organizations and numerous member states to solve the problem of inadequate funding and the lack of a single entity to drive gender equality across the UN system. At the time, then Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called the effort a “watershed” moment and added that “it will now be much more difficult for the world to ignore the challenges facing women and girls—or to fail to take the necessary action.”¹⁷ However, this has not become the reality. In fact, the world is backsliding in many areas. A recent report by Equal Measures 2030 illustrates the gravity of the problem. Of 144 countries surveyed on progress toward gender equality targets embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals, “less than a quarter of countries are making ‘fast’ progress towards gender equality, while a third are making no progress, or, worse still, are moving in the wrong direction.”¹⁸

UN Women has raised awareness about the challenges facing women and girls around the globe, provided technical support to member states to help better address gender inequality, and worked to strengthen ties between civil society and national governments. Even so, it has not yet lived up to its founding vision. UN Women’s shortcomings are tied to the tepid support of many member states, most of whom have never provided the resources and political support necessary to see it succeed. In 2020, UN Women, which receives nearly its entire budget through voluntary contributions, received over 60 percent of its commitments from only ten government partners.¹⁹ In addition, conservative member states hold seats on the board of UN Women and obstruct or undermine action. Many member states that embrace gender equity in rhetoric fail to sufficiently invest in the success of UN Women in practice.

This gap between ambition and implementation exists most acutely in resources. UN Women—which is responsible for addressing challenges facing more than half the world’s population—has encountered financial obstacles from the outset. When the entity was established, UN leadership determined it would need approximately \$500 million to operate effectively.²⁰ Activists had hoped the annual budget would ultimately grow to \$1 billion.²¹ Yet for many years, UN Women fell far short of the \$500 million figure, surpassing it for the first time only in 2019.²² In contrast, UNICEF received over \$7 billion in contributions in 2020 alone.²³ The U.S. government provided approximately \$800 million of UNICEF’s 2020 budget for humanitarian and development programs; it gave UN Women \$18.6 million.²⁴

To be fair, UN Women also shares responsibility. Critics charge that it has been too deferential to conservative voices on its board. They also assert that the entity has taken on far too much—including side initiatives—and that it is stretched too thin. Furthermore, there is a sense that it has never clearly defined and articulated its mission or set clear goals to measure results. Dr. Sima Sami Bahous, the new executive director, has rightfully carried out a listening tour to determine how UN Women can operate more effectively.

A new agenda should reflect the forward-leaning rhetoric current UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has used. Calling himself a “proud feminist,” he has stated that “achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls is the unfinished business of our time, and the greatest human rights challenge in our world.”²⁵ To address these issues, he has argued, “We must urgently transform and redistribute power, if we are to safeguard our future and our planet. That is why all men should support women’s rights and gender equality.”²⁶ To match that rhetoric, UN Women needs to act as a successful vehicle for women and girls’ aspirations and gender equality throughout the UN system and around the world.

To do so, UN Women should consider the following actions:

- *Better define its mandate and articulate how it will measure progress.* UN Women should undertake significant reforms to become more strategic and effective. According to its current strategic plan, the entity follows a “triple-mandate,” including to (1) “support Member States to strengthen global norms and standards for gender equality and women’s empowerment, and mainstream gender perspectives in other thematic areas”; (2) “promote coordination and coherence across the UN system to enhance accountability and results for gender equality and women’s empowerment,” and work with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programs, and services needed to effectively implement standards and truly benefit women and girls worldwide; and (3) undertake operational activities to support member states, upon their request, in translating global norms and standards into legislation, policies, and strategies at the regional and country levels.²⁷ Numerous gender experts argue that this triple mandate is too broad and vague, making it difficult to discern what UN Women is trying to accomplish. UN Women needs to clarify its core goals, the rationale behind them, and how it will measure and define success. UN Women could look to UNFPA for a potential model. In 2018, UNFPA articulated a three-zero vision: zero unmet need for contraception, zero preventable maternal deaths, and zero gender-based violence and harmful practices, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, with a 2030 deadline.²⁸ The vision is clear and concise and provides a built-in metric by which to measure success.
- *Encourage enhanced support from a broader range of member states.* UN Women was established in the wake of the financial crisis in 2010, which caused it to suffer from “reductions in contributions from donors to UN organizations across the board and shrinking official development assistance budgets in general, leaving little room for budget increases for UN Women.”²⁹ Financial contributions have only increased modestly since then. Today, just a handful of countries make meaningful contributions. In

particular, UN Women should seek increased regular, or “core,” resources. Regular resources—rather than program- or issue-specific contributions—give UN women the “stability to plan and achieve long-term objectives and the flexibility to realize short-term goals.”³⁰ For example, regular resources allowed UN Women to immediately respond to the COVID-19 crisis. In 2019, the share of regular resource contributions fell significantly—to 29 percent from 39 percent in 2018. This marked the first time in the history of the entity that regular resources fell below the global Funding Compact threshold of 30 percent.³¹ Although UN Women was able to reverse this decline in 2020, it cannot necessarily continue to do so. Furthermore, the top regular resource contribution in 2020 was made by Finland—for a total of \$20.2 million.³² The ninth and tenth largest donors—Canada and Australia, respectively—each gave \$4.6 million.³³ UN Women will never be able to effectively address the myriad challenges facing women and girls around the world if the bulk of its funding continues to come in “project by project, issue by issue,” because “gender equality by its nature requires a broader lens, one equipped to see all of the pieces that influence or hinder progress, and calibrate the right combinations of responses.”³⁴

- *Forcefully advocate for gender equality at every opportunity across the UN system.* The new executive director of UN Women should use her stature as an undersecretary-general and her seat on the secretary-general’s executive committee to address gender equality whenever possible across the UN system and with member states, particularly those where backsliding on gender equality is most pronounced. The past decade has demonstrated that reaching consensus with those determined to roll back hard-fought gains is not possible. UN Women should stand for gender equality without equivocation. As articulated in a letter to Dr. Bahous from current UN Women and former UNIFEM staff, “UN Women’s task is to disrupt patriarchal power in the UN, in countries, and internationally, via the ways it delivers support, programs and policy initiatives.”³⁵
- *Strengthen regional/country offices.* UN Women should strengthen and build the capacity of its regional and country offices, ensuring that they have empowered and highly qualified staff to provide technical and other support to governments and frontline civil-society organizations. This is even more urgent if country and regional offices are to bear the responsibility of helping commitment makers achieve and track ambitious targets set at the Generation Equality Forum. Furthermore, UN Women should work to strengthen and build the capacity of UN regional and country offices—beyond those of UN Women—so they are better equipped to effectively advocate on gender. In particular, this should focus on bolstering the capacity of UN resident coordinators (RCs), who are the highest-ranking representatives of the UN development system at the country level. UNDP and UNICEF previously affirmed that they see the need for RCs to have a “stronger coordination and convening role in the UN’s work on . . . gender equality.”³⁶
- *Elevate the role of civil society within UN Women.* UN Women has recognized the important contributions of civil society and strengthened ties between CSOs and national

governments. Yet UN Women needs to do more to engage CSOs to build trust and make clear that their input is vital to UN Women's success. As such, it should consider a more formal role for civil society within the organization, including through a recommendation by former UN Women and UNIFEM staff that the Executive Director "propose giving formal representation to feminist civil society groups" on UN Women's executive board and that "women's rights activists" be represented on the bureau responsible for facilitating the annual CSW."³⁷ Opponents of gender equality have proven that they will use every tool at their disposal to roll back rights. UN Women should lead by example, exploring all opportunities to elevate and empower those working for change on the front lines.

Generation Equality: An Opportunity for Real Progress

Last year, UN Women—in coordination with the governments of France and Mexico—convened an ambitious and unconventional effort to accelerate gender equality over the next five years. The Generation Equality Forum, which was held in two sessions—the first in Mexico in March 2021 and the second in France in June and July 2021—was a departure from traditional intergovernmental convenings held to address gender equality. Unlike previous forums, it was held outside the confines of the UN system and brought diverse voices to the table, including UN Agencies; international organizations and governments; philanthropic organizations; the private sector; and feminist, youth, and LGBTQ+ organizations. Ultimately, participants made approximately one thousand voluntary commitments and pledged \$40 billion to address gender equality.³⁸ Notably, many ambitious pledges came from the private sector—including a commitment of more than \$100 million from PayPal to advance financial inclusion and economic empowerment for women and girls around the world³⁹—indicating that multilateralism has undergone a profound shift to elevate private-sector power alongside governments.

Generation Equality was not universally welcomed. Before COVID-19 disrupted in-person events, the forum was originally scheduled for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1995 Fourth World Conference for Women, where the landmark Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted.⁴⁰ Critics argue that rather than holding a conference to encourage voluntary commitments, participants should have gathered to secure enhanced legal and policy commitments to hold governments accountable, potentially through a Fifth World Conference. Yet the forum reflected the reality that securing more progressive binding legal and policy commitments on gender equality than those in the Beijing Declaration would have been all but impossible given the resurgence of regressive actors. UN Women and those involved in promulgating the forum recognized that this unconventional approach represented a more realistic opportunity to make progress toward the 2030 SDGs.

However, today, many experts who strongly supported the forum are rightly concerned that the effort is losing momentum. A summary brief outlining all elements of the accountability framework and comprehensive dashboard of commitments is now scheduled for release at the 2022 Commission on the Status of Women—more than eight months after the Paris forum. Many civil-society organizations are frustrated at the difficulty of meaningful participation, particularly given the focus on localization for gender equality initiatives. These organizations, and governments not originally part of the action coalition leadership structure, have been left out of meaningful involvement in establishing the governance structure. Concerns have emerged about the accuracy of the \$40 billion pledge figure, as has fear that many commitments will not be honored.

Despite these concerns, the Generation Equality Forum has the potential to create a more inclusive convening platform, an innovative accountability framework, and a pipeline for a transformative commitment of resources. For these reasons—rather than focusing on its potential shortfalls or

arguing for new entities to assume the mantle of furthering gender equality—the focus should be on ensuring Generation Equality’s success.

GENERATION EQUALITY: A MORE INCLUSIVE MODEL

Given its multistakeholder model and ambitious commitments, Generation Equality could revitalize the global architecture for gender equality so it is more inclusive and results oriented. Because the forum was not a traditional intergovernmental process, conservative and reactionary voices did not have an opportunity to stall progress or roll back hard-fought gains. Instead, forum participants have been encouraged to identify ambitious goals that could grow in scope over time and to welcome being held to account for those commitments by a larger group of stakeholders.

Notably, the forum established six action coalitions and an associated Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality, covering a critical and progressive range of issues, including gender-based violence; economic justice and rights; bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights; feminist action for climate justice; technology and innovation for gender equality; and feminist movements and leadership, with accompanying goals and targets to measure success. The forum also launched a compact on Women, Peace, and Security and Humanitarian Action (WPS-HA). The WPS-HA Compact calls for redesigning peace and security and humanitarian processes to “systematically and meaningfully include women and girls—including peace-builders, refugees, other forcibly displaced and stateless women and girls—in the decisions that affect their lives.”⁴¹

The scope of issues covered by the six action coalitions helped foster a broad alliance with participants making laudable pledges. For instance, the West African governments of Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Togo “committed to providing free health care to pregnant women and children under the age of five, and to taking legislative and social measures to end harmful norms such as female genital mutilation and child marriage.”⁴² The United States announced the establishment of the Gender Equity and Equality Action Fund—with \$100 million in fiscal year 2021 and a request of \$200 million for fiscal year 2022—to advance economic security for women and girls globally, prevent and respond to gender-based violence, and support underserved and marginalized populations.⁴³ The World Bank, the private sector, and philanthropic organizations also made substantial commitments, pledging to tackle myriad issues.⁴⁴

To build on this momentum, the gender community should focus on sustaining the broad coalition necessary to realize the vision and commitments of the Generation Equality Forum, strengthening networks, seeking new commitment makers, and identifying opportunities for collaboration. Falling short of its stated objectives would fuel cynicism that multilateral convenings on gender tend to produce lofty rhetoric without meaningful results. Success could cause a paradigm shift—making tangible progress while demonstrating an effective, pragmatic, and more inclusive global architecture.

ENSURING THAT THE GENERATION EQUALITY FORUM DELIVERS

To guarantee Generation Equality succeeds, UN Women should do the following:

- *Urgently work to restore confidence in the Generation Equality process.* Challenges related to the conference, coupled with the delay between the last forum in France in July 2021 and the release of an accountability framework and governance structure, has significantly eroded support and enthusiasm for the Generation Equality process. Many advocates and member states are frustrated about short deadlines in the run-up to the events. The conference presented barriers to participation in terms of language, variance in technological capacity, and access for the disabled community. Since the last forum, more than eight months have gone by with little communication or follow-up. There is a real and growing sense that the forum could have been just another shiny moment or fundraising process for UN Women without a clear vision to create and sustain a roadmap for success. UN Women should hasten to restore faith in the process. They also need to be more communicative and transparent with participants about what has led to the delays thus far, and outline what resources they need for an effective and productive process going forward—one that ensures decisions can be swiftly made and implemented.
- *Articulate a clear vision for the Generation Equality Forum and commit to follow-on events.* UN Women should articulate a bold five-year vision for Generation Equality with clear expectations and built-in timelines for commitment makers. Setting expectations now for regular check-ins and at least one significant follow-on event will help generate this momentum and increase enthusiasm for follow-through. Future convenings can amplify commitments that are succeeding, elevate new leaders, foster collaboration and share best practices between forum participants, and encourage new participation and additional commitments. UN Women could also consider other moments to leverage and help build momentum toward an official milestone event, including the upcoming Our Common Agenda summit or 2023 Women Deliver Conference. Women Deliver has already stated that it intends to serve as an “important policy moment and accountability mechanism following a number of commitments that have been made around gender equality at international forums, including the Generation Equality Forum.”⁴⁵
- *Build an effective advocacy campaign to sustain momentum.* Maintaining enthusiasm for Generation Equality over the coming years and soliciting new commitments will require a sophisticated media and outreach campaign, one truly global in scale that can effectively compel action by a diverse audience—from the private sector to local civil-society organizations. UN Women should think creatively, potentially partnering with media and marketing experts with a proven track record of effective international campaigns and incorporating social media, video, podcasts, and other multimedia focused on gender equity and the goals of Generation Equality. This campaign could involve national governments and others committed to the success of the Generation Equality Forum and provide opportunities for local and grassroots organizations to connect to the campaign.
- *Establish an innovative and inclusive governance structure and accountability mechanism.* UN Women should immediately establish an inclusive governance structure that reflects the breadth and diversity of the Forum’s multistakeholder participation. The structure should have strong and transparent accountability mechanisms that include achievable and regularized timelines. In keeping with Generation Equality’s

principle of transformation, UN Women should not try to own the entire process and should instead play more of a consultative role. In particular, UN Women should consider innovative models for both the governance and accountability components, potentially designating one or more qualified outside organizations to oversee and track progress toward commitments and action coalition blueprint targets. In addition, any governance and accountability structure should include clearly defined space for CSOs to independently and progressively analyze commitments' implementation through shadow reports or other mechanisms. The result should be user-friendly, easy to access, and conducive to learning and collaboration.

- *Acknowledge commitment makers who meet or exceed commitments with prizes and public recognition.* Generation Equality leaders should publicly honor governments and other actors who meet or exceed their commitments in full or on time. This could encourage private-sector actors who would welcome the validation of being recognized as a Generation Equality and UN Women leader. Highlighting success stories by region could also help galvanize other countries to grow or launch new commitments.
- *Consider goodwill ambassadors or other prominent officials to help hold commitment makers to account.* The five-year Generation Equality timeline is short. Influential ambassadors could help amplify success stories and encourage new participants to join the Generation Equality effort. UN Women should consider appointing a small group of prominent individuals—akin to those who are members of the Elders—to sustain enthusiasm and help hold commitment makers accountable.
- *Ensure that UN country and regional offices have trained, resourced staff to help realize commitments.* Stakeholders have articulated that any accountability framework “needs to create opportunities for localization and regional-level conversation but not impose procedures or structures that would be too burdensome or would jeopardize the safety of women human rights defenders in hostile contexts. UN Women country and regional offices need to be engaged and actively support this work.”⁴⁶ By almost every account, UN Women field staff are overburdened by current responsibilities or are precluded from taking on new responsibilities because they are committed to a specific project or program. Making sure member states can realize commitments is integral to the success of the forum and, more broadly, to the attainment of UN Women's agenda and the SDGs. UN Women needs to ensure trained and resourced staff are in place for this purpose.
- *Ensure that civil society has the resources to fully participate in and support Generation Equality.* The lack of adequate funding for CSOs following the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing undermined momentum for gender equality.⁴⁷ To ensure this does not happen again, Generation Equality leaders and other donors should support every opportunity—including by considering establishing a pooled fund—to bring civil-society members together over the next five years to build networks, share expertise, and help sustain momentum around the forum. This should also include ensuring that CSOs have the resources to participate in the formal Generation Equality governance structure and to implement their stated commitments.

A Vital Role for the United States

The U. S. government has a vital role to play in strengthening the international architecture for gender equality. Criticisms of the United States within the broader gender architecture are well founded. The United States is one of only a few countries that have failed to ratify CEDAW, and it has had administrations and majorities in Congress hostile to both the UN system and gender equality as an objective, particularly with respect to sexual and reproductive health and rights. However, the role of the United States as a norm setter and as the largest donor to the UN system means it retains an outsize global reach and convening power. Furthermore, it has a vested interest in seeing UN Women and the Generation Equality Forum succeed, not only to advance gender equality but also to help address other priorities including climate change, the alleviation of global poverty, and improved global health outcomes.

Recently, the White House signaled a renewed commitment by launching its National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality, a wide-ranging and ambitious document aimed at tackling challenges both in the United States and abroad. The international component is significant in scope, promising that the U.S. government will address and prioritize myriad issues—including such considerations as land and inheritance citizenship rights; unequal access to education; improved safety and transportation for girls traveling to and from school; access to better-paying jobs; and improved protections for workers in the informal economy.⁴⁸ Progress toward the Joe Biden administration’s objectives will require a significant diplomatic effort and the participation of trained staff in every bureau, embassy, and mission at the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and other relevant agencies. It will also require new resources, including those that enable embassies to do gender work in their host countries and that provide support to grassroots organizations and civil society.

If the United States can successfully implement and adequately resource its strategy, it would mark a significant shift in moving gender equality from rhetoric to reality, both at home and abroad. The U.S. government should also consider the following actions to help strengthen the international architecture for gender equality:

- *Increase its contribution to UN Women and deepen involvement.* The Biden administration should prioritize its involvement with UN Women and make a robust commitment to its success, bringing the United States in line with leading donors to the entity. The United States is the top donor to the United Nations, but it was only the eleventh largest donor overall to UN Women in 2020, with contributions totaling approximately \$19 million.⁴⁹ The U.S. Strategy to Advance Gender Equity and Equality states that the U.S. government will “partner with multilateral institutions and support other global efforts to advance gender equity and equality.”⁵⁰ By increasing its contribution to UN Women so that it is in line with the top member state donors, the United States would send a strong signal that it is serious about this commitment, while also gaining standing to encourage other

countries—including those who have not typically made significant commitments—to follow suit. Furthermore, the U.S. government should consider encouraging UN Women to reopen its liaison office in Washington, DC.

- *Work with Congress to build support for international participation.* The Biden administration should work with Congress to build enduring support for increased funding for UN Women. At a minimum, the United States should become one of the top donors for UN Women. By increasing the regular resource commitment, the United States could help strengthen regional and country offices run by UN Women around the world. Staff could, in turn, help provide the technical expertise essential for realizing the commitments made at the Generation Equality Forum.
- *Build stronger connections with civil society.* The Biden administration should establish a more formal role for civil society on gender equality to facilitate more robust information sharing. Specifically, it should consider establishing an advisory committee on gender equality. One model to consider is the Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Assistance.⁵¹ Such an effort would send a strong message internationally that the U.S. government values the input of civil society, which is particularly important as space for civil society continues to shrink around the globe. The United States should ensure organizations representing youth and minority groups participate, as well as organizations focused on strengthening the relationship between the U.S. government and the United Nations. It should hold regular meetings to seek feedback on current Biden administration initiatives, while also welcoming input for new priorities.

BOLSTERING U.S. GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR GENERATION EQUALITY

The U.S. government under the Donald Trump administration was notably absent from preparations for the Generation Equality Forum. The Biden administration has an opportunity to make up lost ground by offering to cohost a possible 2023 check-in event for Generation Equality with a country from the Global South. Doing so would send a robust signal that the United States is committed to realizing the ambitious goals set at the forum, while establishing the United States as a leader on behalf of gender equality. This does not mean any forum or event would have to be hosted in the United States; rather, the United States could consider a location that would guarantee the maximum participation of participants from the Global South. Alternatively, the United States could also make a significant financial contribution for this purpose.

Furthermore, although leadership of the Generation Equality action coalitions has been established, the U.S. government should select one or more coalitions in which to play an active and substantive role. These selections could reinforce the priorities embedded in the U.S. Strategy to Advance Gender Equity and Equality. Furthermore, the United States should work to make meaningful commitments across all six action coalitions and set an example by regularly sharing progress toward its stated goals.⁵² To date, the United States has made important commitments under three action coalitions, including gender-based violence, economic justice and rights, and bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Examples of U.S. commitments

include working to reauthorize and strengthen the Violence Against Women Act—dramatically increasing the U.S. investment in care infrastructure, including a \$400 billion investment in expanding access to home- or community-based care—and proposing a \$3 billion investment to further address the maternal health crisis in the United States.⁵³ The United States should make additional commitments in support of the remaining three coalitions—climate justice, technology and innovation for gender equality, and feminist movements and leadership.

Conclusion

The international architecture dedicated to gender equality is still relatively new and needs continued reform and innovation. Doing so requires strengthening entities such as UN Women and initiatives such as the Generation Equality Forum rather than creating new institutions. Although countries and other multilateral actors should always consider innovative strategies to further gender equality, successfully implementing the many ambitious commitments made to date is particularly imperative at this moment, given the urgency and breadth of gender equality challenges around the world. Successful implementation would lend meaningful support on the ground and demonstrate that the international gender equity infrastructure can deliver results. To achieve such results, governments and other actors need to better prioritize and resource UN Women and make a multifaceted effort to ambitiously realize their Generation Equality Forum commitments.

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Renewing the Global Architecture for Gender Equality

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This report reflects the judgments and recommendations of the authors. It does not necessarily represent the views of members of the advisory committee, whose involvement should in no way be interpreted as an endorsement of the report by either themselves or the organizations with which they are affiliated.

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