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**Young Women and Girls at the Center of Development:  
An intergenerational perspective for leaping into the future.**

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

The world is rapidly changing around us. This creates opportunities and threats that we need to take into account as women's movements. We dream of a world of peace, justice, health, freedom, and care for the environment. When planning for that future, we need to consider several global trends currently impacting development and human well-being. We also recognise that the world will continue to change, so we need to change as the world changes for us to remain effective and relevant:

**Demographic Trends and Youth Majority:** The current world population is 7 billion, including 1.8 billion youth. By 2035, the World Bank estimates that the world's population will be three times this size, with young people as the majority group globally. In many parts of the world, the majority of the young will be female. This trend will impact decision making patterns, production, innovation, consumption and the kind of services needed in communities, especially for young women and girls. We must anticipate the positive role that knowledgeable, empowered and skilled young people could play in advancing peace, justice, and gender equality and in caring for our environment. In a world of gender inequalities, abuse and marginalisation of women and girls, it is crucial to transform the role of young women and girls, while also changing power structures and the root causes of rights violations, conflicts, poverty and marginalisation.

**Sustainable Development Agenda & Gender Equality:** At the heart of the 2030 agenda are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include 17 goals and 169 targets covering economic, social and environmental issues. These SDGs mark the first time *all* countries, including the rich and powerful, have committed to take action toward sustainable development. It has now been 20 years since the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women; yet we have seen limited advancement for women at all levels. The policy space for women and civil society organisations is rapidly shrinking. The explosion of women's organisations post-Beijing is finding that there are limited resources to sustain the work. An increase in fundamentalism and extremism means that women and girls are often treated like commodities, and men are taking more control over women's bodies and decisions. In addition, new economic models, including the pressure of sustainable employment and other sources of livelihoods, are creating time poverty for women, who now have less time to volunteer as they strive to balance family and other obligations. Therefore it is important to have safe space for young women girls to self-organise and define their future

**Technology:** is shaping how people relate, connect, transact, govern and resource. It is also influencing the way we share knowledge and decide what we value, especially in dominant, mainstream society. Technology is setting new norms in communications, challenging hierarchies, and blurring boundaries as social media breaks the barriers and removes the power of fundraising intermediaries, news media and others. Technology is also reshaping access to services, including education, health information, counselling, and pastoral care, and providing new jobs and volunteer opportunities. With tools such as crowdsourcing/funding, online giving and collaborative initiatives, resource sharing takes on new dimensions. At the same time, technology advances are creating new rights violations for women and girls, such as cyber bullying, trafficking and significant loss of privacy. The widening digital gaps across class, regions and age offer both serious challenges and significant opportunities for delivering on our mission. Young people are accessing and creating technology. The future lies in the use of technology by young people.

**Climate change and environmental sustainability:** Today, women are the majority of the world's poor, and they are also most at risk of exposure to the harmful effects of climate change, natural disasters, and human-induced environmental destruction. We can feel the effects of climate change in the short-term through natural disasters, such as landslides, floods and hurricanes; and in the long-term, through more gradual environmental destruction. These events already impact many important factors, including agriculture and food security;

biodiversity and ecosystems; water resources; human health; and human settlements and migration patterns. Women's capacity to cope with these changes is limited as they face economic, political and social barriers to make their voices heard. We have a responsibility as adults to preserve that inheritance for young people. Young people need to be responsible so as to preserve the environment.

**Armed Conflict, Terrorism and Fragile Governance:** The increasing intensity and complexity of armed conflicts and occupation, ethnic violence, military oppressions, terrorism and fragile governance continues to have devastating impacts on women, families and communities. Nuclear weapons and the potential to abuse nuclear technology, biological weapons, and the unmanned aerial combat vehicles (combat drones) create additional threats. When natural and financial resources are illegally exploited, this causes additional stress and violence, and women often feel the impact physically, psychologically and through sexual violence. In many situations, religion and faith are manipulated and abused to further fuel the crisis and the violence. Young people are the most affected in every aspect and yet they are not on decision making tables. They carry the responsibility of reconstruction, recovery and healing in fragile states.

**Shifting roles of governments, peoples and capital:** The post-2015 development agenda sharply revealed the shifts driving development and the different approaches to human rights and justice. While governments are increasingly pushed to create environments and policy frameworks enabling economic and social change, the private sector, corporations and private foundations are also becoming significant development actors. As institutional funding decreases, the space for civil society and not-for-profit civil society organisations is shrinking, and financial resources are increasingly tied to specific projects. This threatens the sustainability of many organisations. As roles shift, most organizations need to reposition themselves if they want to remain viable<sup>1</sup>. Recent trends show that young people are the majority voters and consumers in most societies and therefore their voice cannot be ignored. There is a need to invest in new forms of volunteering and philanthropy by young people.

**Role of Faith and Religion:** The role of faith-based organisations in delivering community services is shifting, in both the development and humanitarian sectors. Services provided range from education programmes (with schools, universities and places of worship becoming places of learning and knowledge sharing), to health care services, water and sanitation and traditional pastoral care for the vulnerable and marginalised. At the same time, faith- and church-related institutions, are consolidating organisationally. We also have seen women of faith engage strongly within the Christian and ecumenical space to further empower women through denominational-based work by the United Methodist Women, Mothers Unions and other groups.

We have also seen an increase in conservative values on issues of family and women's human rights. While liberation theology does not seem to free women from sexism, patriarchy and oppression, there is a strong feminist trend, which provides a framework for women to celebrate and affirm both our rights and our faith within our Christian traditions. There are still tension on how become a resource for asserting and affirming the dignity and leadership of all women in church and society because this is the future. Young people of faith should feel safe in shaping and advancing their rights.

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<sup>1</sup> Other organisations have dissolved such as Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, One World Trust or there have been mergers to ensure survival i.e. ICCO kn Actie; EED & Bread for the World, or change locations and ways of work such as World Communion of Reformed Churches, relocated to Stuttgart from Geneva and World Organisation of Boys Scouts (WOSM) relocated to Malaysia; or change structure for greater decentralisation of key functions i.e. YMCA and ACT Alliance. Various YWCAs have closed doors, reorganised ways of work or some are changing their identity.

## LEAPING INTO THE FUTURE

**Gender Equality.** Gender equality means that women and men and boys and girls should enjoy equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities. It also means that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration while recognising the diversity within those groups. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) defines discrimination against women as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.” (Article 1). We need to ensure that we transform the world so both women and men are valued, have opportunities and participate in decision making equally.

There has been endorsement from all sectors that we need to develop women and girls’ leadership and work together to create a world of justice, peace, freedom, health and care for the environment. We need to find the balance between responding to the practical, immediate needs of women, while addressing the root and underlying causes for inequality, discrimination, exclusion or poverty. If we are to break the cycle of poverty, if we are to end child marriage, if we are to achieve gender equality, we need to ground ourselves in making sure that you people have the education

**Young women and girls at the center.** We should all endeavor to empower these young women and girls and ensure their rights are respected and their voices are heard. We envision young people innovating and challenging the status quo with thought leadership, creativity and new economic, social and political models that enhance human potential and human dignity. They will become co-creators in development and in shaping the rights and security agenda for a world of justice, gender equality and rights for all, as they leverage the power of technology.<sup>1</sup>

**Transforming Power Structures.** We must address the underlying root causes of inequalities, rights violations, marginalisation and exclusion of women and the gap in their access to opportunities. Transforming the social, economic, cultural and political power structures which are currently expressed in and through patriarchy is critical. This will require a full power analysis as well as changes both within and outside the movement to address issues related to privilege and entitlement, especially the intersection of race, class, caste and gender.

**A World without Violence & War** A focus on social, economic, gender and climate justice is a great act of healing, reconciliation and solutions. It will be critical to establish systems that empower women and girls to access and benefit from diverse forms of justice. This will build on the strong foundation of our work on ending violence against women. It will help create peace when communities are in conflict and at war and provide closure when people hurt each other. We need to continue to have strong programmes that prevent violence, provide safe spaces for young women and girls, respond to structural violence and provide support to survivors of violence. We need to strengthen this work, while building peace within our families, communities and nations and across diverse groups of people.

**Faith culture and rights.** Faith based organizations work in contexts of diversity of religion and faith. They are both a resource and strength in achieving gender equality. They can leverage this identity for advancing empowerment of women, while transforming the patriarchal elements and practices in faith. They are also committed to the basic dignity of

every human being, born in the image of the creator and the fundamental obligation of all to uphold the rights of women, young women and girls. Women must be able to celebrate their faith and their rights without contradictions. We must not make excuses for faith, culture and rights if we are to reach gender equality.