



## Welcome Gathering for the 69<sup>th</sup> UN Commission on the Status of Women

### A reflective introduction to CSW69 and the Beijing Platform for Action

As you are all probably aware, the theme of this year's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is a revisit of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Beijing Platform is an action plan for the achievement of gender equality that emerged from the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women in 1995. Though we commemorate its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, we lament that it remains the most progressive framework for the advancement of gender equality that the world's governments have ever agreed upon.

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As one possible approach to the theme of the Beijing Platform, I invite you to imagine, for a few minutes, that the Beijing Platform is a giant canvas. This year's Commission on the Status of Women will be an opportunity for people of all genders to come together to paint a story upon that canvas through three images:

1. The first image will be our memory of the way that life was 30 years ago. What inequalities did we see among people of different genders in 1995?
2. The second image will be our perception of the reality in which we are living at the present moment. Which gaps between genders have gotten smaller in the last 30 years? Which have gotten larger? What new gaps have emerged?
3. The third image that we will paint during this Commission is a vision for the world as it should be. In other words, an image of the world that allows people of every gender to flourish in every land, the world that God intends for us to inhabit and that God invites us to co-create.

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The more people who are involved in this painting process, the more unique colors and brushstrokes will be included on the canvas. Through our encounters with one another, we will create images that reflect the truth much more completely and accurately than any image any of us could achieve independently.

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To extend this metaphor, the paintbrushes that we will use are the opportunities we will have during the Commission to be active participants in this collaborative work of art. They are:

- the questions we might ask of panelists,
- the introductions and chatter we might exchange with the unknown people sitting beside us in the event rooms or with whom we might be squeezed into an elevator,
- the contact information we might exchange with potential partners or teachers
- the brief conversations we might have with representatives of government when we approach them at the end of an event in which they have offered their remarks.

The brushes will be all around us, but it will be up to each one of us to select one, pick it up, and press it to the canvas!

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Finally, the most significant component of our creative endeavor: the paints! The paints on the canvas will be a vibrant combination of personal experiences and observations. They will be stories that inspires and others that devastate us. They will be innovative projects and ideas. Each participant in the Commission brings their own set of colors to splash, splatter, or gently blend across the canvas. Every contribution is valid and makes the final image more true to life.

As we prayerfully consider the 12 themes of the Beijing Platform, I will pause and invite you to reflect on the many shades of paint that you could bring to the shared canvas during this CSW. If you have a piece of paper or a word document available, you might even wish to journal as we proceed. For each area in critical need of action, you might down the name of a person, place, or project that you associate with that thematic area. If possible, try to recall a name from your personal experience or that of your congregation.

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The first area for action is poverty...

**Poverty:** When women are poor, their rights are not protected and they face double discrimination: once on account of their gender and again on account of their economic situation. Women, their families, communities and economies suffer as a result. Responses to women's poverty include training, loans, and practical skill-training opportunities that empower women economically, give them a voice, strengthen social services that are available to them, and increase everyone's awareness of women's rights. *Where or through whom have you witnessed women's poverty? What responses have you witnessed that you could add to our canvas?*

**Education & training:** Education of girls and women is essential if they are to become leaders of change. While women and girls today are far more educated than ever before, gaps remain. Educated women benefit entire societies, contributing to flourishing economies and the improved health, nutrition and education of their families. Education and training are also tools to help change harmful gender stereotypes. *Where or through whom have you witnessed the need for women's or girls' education? What responses have you witnessed that you could add to our canvas?*

**Health:** Women need to be healthy in order to realize their full potential. Their health requires proper nutrition, sexual and reproductive rights, comprehensive sexuality education, adequate mental-health and maternal-health services, and freedom from violence. We see 45% fewer maternal deaths worldwide than we did in 1990. Still, 800 women die every day from preventable causes that are related to pregnancy. *Where or through whom have you witnessed the need for women's or girls' health education or healthcare? What responses have you witnessed that you could add to our canvas?*

**Violence:** Violence hurts women and girls and hampers their ability to thrive in multiple ways. Since the Beijing Conference, an historic two-thirds of countries have established laws to stop domestic violence. Still, gaps in laws, legal protections, and access to justice and essential services for survivors remain worldwide. Responses include education against misogyny and toxic stereotypes of masculinity as well as the provision of safety, shelter, healthcare, and legal services for survivors. *Where or through whom*

*have you witnessed gender-based violence? What responses have you witnessed that you could add to our canvas?*

**Armed Conflict & Peacebuilding:** Wars and armed conflict destroy families and societies and leave women and girls particularly vulnerable. Sexual violence is widespread and often used as a war tactic. Responses to this reality include engagement of women in all aspects of negotiations, peacebuilding and reconstruction to build inclusive societies after a conflict; training security personnel to detect and stop sexual violence; and reforming justice and security institutions to ensure they address the particular needs of women and girls. *Where or through whom have you witnessed the impact of armed conflict on women and girls? How have you witnessed women's role in peacebuilding?*

**Economy:** Whether in businesses, on farms, as entrepreneurs or employees, or through unpaid domestic or care work at home, women make enormous contributions to economies. Gender discrimination means women often end up in insecure, low-wage jobs, and constitute a small minority of those in senior positions. Efforts to economically empower women include skill and leadership training; promotion of women's rights to own land and other assets; establishment of protocols for just response to violence and sexual harassment in workplaces; and legal protections against wage discrimination. *Where or through whom have you witnessed the need for women's economic empowerment? What responses have you witnessed that you could add to our canvas?*

**Leadership & decision making:** Once in leadership roles, women have a positive impact, but they are under-represented as voters and in elected offices, corporate boardrooms, and academia. Responses to this imbalance include training for women to build their skills for leadership in these various arenas; public sensitization campaigns on gender equality and the value of women's leadership, promotion of women's rights to vote, campaign, and assemble without fear of violence. *Where or through whom have you witnessed the need for women's leadership? What responses have you witnessed that you could add to our canvas?*

**Governance:** While 143/195 countries guarantee equality between women and men in their constitutions, intentional and unintentional gender discrimination persists throughout governance systems throughout the world. Special government agencies can play a vital role in identifying and eliminating gender inequalities and discrimination throughout their laws and systems. Governments can also establish laws and action plans that proactively accelerate their national progress toward gender equity. *Where or through whom have you witnessed gender-based discrimination by a government? What responses have you witnessed that you could add to our canvas?*

**Human rights:** People of all genders are entitled to rights that are equal to the rights afforded to men. In many countries, however, women's and girls' access to justice, inheritance, land, education, and free movement are denied or inferior to the access enjoyed by men and boys. *Where or through whom have you witnessed the denial of human rights on the basis of gender? What responses have you witnessed that you could add to our canvas?*

**Representation in media creation and coverage:** The media plays a significant role in perpetuating and challenging social norms that condone discrimination or violence against women. It can objectify women but also showcase strong women leaders and protagonists who can become role models for their audience. Efforts to promote gender equality are enhanced when we improve media coverage of women's stories, elevate stories that challenge rather than reinforce entrenched stereotypes, and

provide people of all genders with more space and skills to be the storytellers as well as the story. *Where or through whom have you witnessed the misrepresentation or underrepresentation of women and girls in the media? Where have you witnessed refreshingly accurate representation of women and girls as storytellers or as the subject of a media story?*

**Women and the Environment:** Women are among the most affected by climate change. They are often the ones gathering water, fishing or farming land affected by flooding. Meanwhile, their voices are often ignored in environmental planning and management. They also have less access to land and productive resources. Responses include involvement of women in environmental decision-making at all levels, integrating their concerns in policies and programmes, and establishing ways to assess the impact of development and environmental policies on women. *Where or through whom have you witnessed the impact of environmental degradation or disaster on women and girls? What responses have you witnessed that you could add to our canvas?*

**Protection of girls from harmful practices:** Specific forms of violence and harmful practices, including female genital mutilation (FGM) and cutting, breast ironing, and child marriage, affect girls in particular. Responses include raising awareness of girls' rights not only among girls themselves but also with educators, parents (fathers in particular), and religious leaders. *Where or through whom have you witnessed the impact of harmful practices on girls? What responses have you witnessed that you could add to our canvas?*