It is a privilege to address UN Women’s Executive Board as a member of the Global Civil Society Advisory Group, as a senior associate of a global network of gender equality specialists – Gender at Work – and as a Board member of Breakthrough, a global women’s human rights organization that uses innovative social media to make violence against women unacceptable and of Just Associates (JASS), which works tirelessly to strengthen the voice, visibility and collective power of women to create a just and sustainable world for all.

We are inspired by UN Women’s insistence that, by 2030, we will achieve Planet 50:50, a world where gender discrimination is history, where gender equality has become the new normal. For that vision to have a remote chance of transpiring, we must work collectively to catalyze huge changes in current thinking and practice here, in the UN itself, and everywhere. The deep structures that hold gender inequality have been rooting themselves in our attitudes and practices for centuries. As the governing body of the UN’s central entity for women’s rights and gender equality, your opportunity to change the course of history is unparalleled.

As my sister CSAG members have said, there are some immediate priorities where your leadership can help us move toward a world free of gender discrimination.

Firstly, the political declaration from the upcoming 20-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action must signal Member States’ unified voice for completing unfinished agendas, and addressing new challenges to women’s rights. The UN needs to create new opportunities for the growing constituency of young women and men who want to take leadership on this issue. Is it time to consider a Fifth World Conference in 2020? UN Women’s leadership in facilitating a discussion of the pro’s and con’s of this will be critical.

Secondly, UN Women’s Executive Board members must be at the frontlines of ensuring the post-2015 development agenda retains specific and transformative
goals and targets for gender equality, and incorporates gender dimensions in all other aspects. This commitment should be clear in the political declaration of the 20-year review of Beijing. It will require joining and supporting UN Women’s advocacy and the advocacy of women’s rights and social justice networks around the world if negotiations try to whittle down existing gender equality goals and targets.

Finally, to the topic that is on your official agenda. Resources. As UN Women’s Executive Board, you must share the concern that the organization has, thus far, failed to secure the $500 million in the Secretary General’s initial projections. $500 million is actually a modest budget for an organization that is the UN’s leader on women’s empowerment and rights. It pales in comparison to other operational UN organizations, even as UN Women is expected to undertake both normative AND operational responsibilities. As UN Women’s governing body, you have heard the mounting evidence that links advances in women’s empowerment to healthier children, more effective decision-making, more prosperous companies, communities and countries and so many other development outcomes. What prevents more robust funding of UN Women?

Inadequate support for UN Women – as compared to other multilateral organizations – reflects a general trend of under-funding to women’s organizations worldwide. This is happening despite evidence showing that one of the most important factors to determine whether a country has adequate policies for gender equality in place is the presence of autonomous and influential women’s rights movements. As the Association for Women’s Rights in Development has warned, failing to support women’s rights organizations when you’re committed to gender equality is like Watering the Leaves and Starving the Roots.

The opportunity cost of failing to fully fund UN Women’s Strategic Plan is significant. Countries lose a respected and capable broker, since UN Women’s presence depends on full funding. Women’s rights organizations and networks, like ours, lose support for innovative pilot initiatives and powerful platforms for policy dialogue and partnerships that UN Women creates. And the UN system loses the full potential of its internal expertise on gender equality at a time when it is more important than ever.

This Executive Board must be at the forefront of reversing this trend. It can mobilize the funds needed to fully support UN Women’s Strategic Plan and change the predictable story of under-funding for women’s organizations. Our collective efforts have led us to this moment in history when we actually can see the potential for a tipping point on gender equality. Let’s seize it.

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