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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure for me to participate at this Geneva NGO FORUM –Beijing+20 to review the progress made in the advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in the UN ECE Region. SDC, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland is very proud to sponsor this NGO FORUM in the international city of Geneva. On a personal note, my participation in this NGO FORUM reminds me of an inspiring experience that I had 34 years ago when I participated in the NGO Forum of the 2nd World Conference on Women in Copenhagen in 1980. At that time, I was a graduate student in social anthropology preparing my dissertation exams with a focus on gender, which was a new concept, while in Copenhagen everyone spoke of the participation or integration of women in development. Progress was made with the Women's World Conferences in Nairobi and Beijing, culminating in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Despite the important progress achieved, many of the issues discussed, even in Copenhagen, are still not solved or sufficiently addressed today.

Let me explain how gender mainstreaming advanced in our organization. When I started to work for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in 1990, SDC had just started to promote gender and development. I had the privilege to participate in the group that developed the first gender policy. At the time, SDC had a large majority of men as professional and management staff who were not necessarily sensitive or open-minded to gender issues. In order not to create more resistance, the first policy adopted by SDC in 1993, called for gender balanced development instead of gender equality. Since then, SDC has gone through different phases of trying to mainstream gender in all its work. Besides the promotion of the policy and gender as a cross-cutting theme, gender training courses were offered for the staff. Given the slow progress, SDC decided a few years later to make gender an obligatory cross-cutting theme in all country programs. By 2003, with advances in international norms, SDC was ready for a new policy with more progressive terminology entitled "Gender equality - a key for poverty alleviation and sustainable development". The strategy continued to be Gender Mainstreaming with

complementary specific women's programs and other measures. The implementation was flexible to allow the adaptation to the particular contexts of the countries. The flexibility of the strategy has its strengths and weaknesses, because it can be too much subject to the interpretation of the SDC country office directors. Moreover, the results of a mainstreaming strategy are not easy to measure. On the basis of these lessons learned, Switzerland has been very engaged in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as a stand-alone goal and the integration of gender targets in all other goals in the post-2015 agenda, which if adopted by the UN Member States, will inspire our future policy.

Let me now address a couple of issues that have, among others, contributed to limit progress in gender equality. One is how we communicate about gender and the other is the insufficiency of gender capacity and expertise. They are related to how we can get the people in power, who are still in the majority men, to become more engaged for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, which UN-Women is addressing with the HeForShe Campaign. I keep hearing from men that those trying to advance gender equality talk too much about women, implying that we are not making an objective analysis of gender issues. I think that we often only look at the disadvantages that gender roles and stereotypes have for women, but do not look at the disadvantages for men. I postulate that the stereotypical gender roles are also constraining to men and we need to analyze and recognize this. We need to communicate that the changes we want, do not necessarily have to be negative for men. They can also bring advantages for many men who may suffer from the societal stereotypes and professional expectations on them. Second, the rhetoric around gender is often not clear. When we speak about gender, some non-specialists simply understand women, others understand equality, but not many understand that we speak about the socio-cultural determination of men's and women's roles. Gender is a complex matter and referring to it in a general way is felt by many decision-makers to be too confusing or technocratic. These feelings of many men and also some women lead to sentiments of incompetence, which obviously no one likes to reveal. This often results in a lack of interest or even resistance. I draw two conclusions from these remarks. We need to improve our communication in relation to gender and we need to increase the capacity and expertise on gender issues. Let me explain. In order to advance gender equality, the empowerment of women is an important strategy because most inequalities affect women more, but it is not the only one. If we end up talking only about women, we lose the interest of men. However, if we talk about gender we face another problem. The complexity of the gender concept requires that we are much clearer about what we mean by promoting gender-sensitive development or taking gender concerns into account. What does this mean concretely in the case of economic development, climate change, or macro-economic policy, for example. Clear explanation and better communication is necessary in order to make gender understandable to non-specialists. Second, given that gender issues cut across all sectors and themes, everyone involved in policy and operational planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation has to have an understanding of the gender issues and concerns. This requires a massive development of capacity of all persons involved in these activities. At the same time, there is a need for many

more gender experts who can provide advice to non-specialists. The improved communication, increased gender capacity and the professionalization of gender expertise are key factors for advancing the empowerment of women and girls, the abolishment of gender stereotypes and the achievement of gender equality.

Women's NGOs have played an enormous role in the past in raising the awareness of governments, policy makers, parliaments, the private sector and others of gender inequalities and the discrimination of women and girls, as well as the need for the creation of UN-Women. Moreover, women's NGOs continue to play an important role in the implementation of development programs, including those of SDC. Therefore, I call upon you to help us in improving communication on gender concerns and on raising the awareness of governments, parliaments, universities and training institutions on the importance of developing more capacity and expertise in relation to gender issues.

Thank you