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Thank you, honorable ambassadors, distinguished panelists, UNDEF colleagues, and esteemed guests: your presence here today reaffirms the importance of the role that women's civil society organizations play in strengthening human rights and enhancing democratic participation. In my academic research on women's civil society initiatives in different parts of the world, I have consistently found that women's organizations are a major driving force behind institutional innovation. By creating new participatory mechanisms and new avenues for community engagement, they have contributed to the recent transformation of international development norms from a top-down approach to a collaborative framework.

We now take as self-evident the important principle that women's participation in political and economic processes benefits society as a whole.¹ It is important that we treat this as a foundational principle: yet we should also remember that it was not self-evident two or three generations ago. Women's community-based organizations, particularly in rural areas and lower-income countries, have worked hard to demonstrate that building gender equality is part and parcel of the struggle to address problems of hunger, poverty, poor sanitation, educational access, civil conflict, and attacks by militant insurgents. Women-led initiatives create strong connections between women's agency and the resilience of societies facing humanitarian and environmental crises.

A close look at these developments reveals some long-term trends. Democracy initiatives that focus on gender equality are facing historic opportunities and unprecedented challenges in the twenty-first century. The opportunity is clear: women's engagement in civil society has grown exponentially in the period following the Beijing conference. In many parts of the world today, young women and girls are able to find enabling resources in civil society—that is, they find support in the public spaces for deliberation that are distinct from the state and the economy, thus contributing to holding states accountable. Young women today raise their voices in ways that previous generations could not.

But the twenty-first century has also brought with it a number of daunting challenges. The right of self-determination, which is the foundation of democracy, is endangered by persistent poverty, the escalation of civil conflicts, and an increase in the number of refugees and displaced persons. Supporting women's efforts to be self-determining in these contexts is incredibly difficult work. Nevertheless, UNDEF and the organizations represented by our panelists have found ways of making effective interventions in precisely these contexts.

We have four panelists with us today, and as Annika said, they all represent UNDEF initiatives that are innovative and tangible.

From India, we have Dr. Bhavani Rao, Director of Ammachi Labs at Amrita University. In this capacity, Dr. Rao led the implementation of two UNDEF projects -- empowering women in India through innovative vocational education and training; and empowering women to become champions of sanitation in India. As we know,

¹ "...empowering women and girls has a multiplier effect..." UNDP, "Sustainable Development Goal #5: Gender Equality". <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-5-gender-equality.html>

better sanitation is a huge challenge in India. Achieving it is an acute need for women's full participation in society.

From Nigeria, we have Dr. Abiola Akiyode-Afolabi, Executive Director of the Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre. Dr. Akiyode-Afolabi managed the implementation of an UNDEF project on an issue of life and death importance in Nigeria – an issue which has grabbed headlines worldwide for several years. The UNDEF project works to strengthen community dialogue for girls' security and safety in Nigerian schools.

Giving voice to Latin America, we have Ms. Luisa Córdoba, Director of International Cooperation for TECHO, a youth-led organization working in Latin America and the Caribbean. TECHO implemented an UNDEF project to empower shanty-town dwellers by building democratic spaces in slums in Argentina, Colombia, El Salvador, and Peru. As Ms. Córdoba will explain to us, in Latin-America's shanty towns such efforts usually are carried by the women of the community.

Finally, for a perspective on an immense challenge in the Arab region, we have Ms. Lina Abou Habib, Executive Director of the Women's Learning Partnership, which works with autonomous and independent partner organizations particularly in Muslim-majority societies. Ms. Abou Habib oversees the implementation of an UNDEF project for participation and empowerment of Syrian refugee women in Jordan and Lebanon.

Ladies and gentlemen, there you have our panel.

Let me first ask each of you: What is the biggest challenge you confront in doing this work, and what is the biggest achievement?