



Europe and Central Asia



## Take five: “When citizens are included from the start, their commitment is strong”

**Date:** Wednesday, 21 May 2025



Carolyn Handschin-Moser, President of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women at the United Nations. Credit: Personal archive

***Carolyn Handschin-Moser is the President of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women at the United Nations in Geneva. She is also the Vice-President of the Women's Federation for World Peace International (WFWPI) and Director of its Office for United Nations Relations worldwide. As a participant in the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69) - the principal global intergovernmental body dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women – held in March 2025 in New York, Handschin-Moser reflects on key takeaways from CSW69 and explains why cooperation between civil society, governments, and international organizations can make a significant difference in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment.***

**How was CSW69 different this year, and why does it matter for gender equality and women's empowerment?**

What stood out in this year's CSW was that we collectively looked back to a positive, uplifting, and unifying moment in our history – Beijing 1995. This milestone represents a shared achievement between the UN and governments, so our reflection comes from a place of responsibility, not criticism from the outside.

We asked ourselves how we can do better - as networks of civil society organizations - and how we can work more closely with governments and UN mechanisms. This spirit of collaboration is one of the essential yet often under-referenced elements in discussions around revitalizing CSW.

**As the world marks the 30th anniversary of the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), governments have adopted the [Political Declaration](#), which stands as a testament to what can be achieved even in challenging times. In your opinion, what are three takeaways from the Political Declaration?**



One key takeaway is the strength of consensus. Ideally, this should extend to include both governments and civil society, engaging and working together.

Another essential element is commitment. Long-term commitment is critical, along with mechanisms to measure progress. Commitment becomes much easier when individuals are part of the decision-making process and know that their circumstances are being taken into account. Peer review, supported by models of good practice, is one way to strengthen this. Each step, including peer review, should involve open interaction with civil society, NGOs, and the private sector.

Finally, leadership plays a crucial role – not only in achieving gender equality but also in promoting peace. For women to reach the highest levels of influence, they must be supported early on. Families, teachers – particularly through STEM and leadership training -, and both secular and religious leaders must contribute to developing character, knowledge, and skills. The best approach is a self-reflective, bottom-up system where peer support encourages people to shift norms – much like within a family environment.

### **Why is it important to expand civil society representation in official negotiations?**

The bottom line is that even the best government intentions can fall short if local knowledge isn't tapped into. Decisions will require external artificial enforcement if they are not aligned with the will of broader society, including women, youth, and elders.

Conversely, when citizens are invited to participate from the planning stage onward, their commitment is strong. They become a resource. Leadership and vision are needed to create innovative ways to “harness civil society voices” and build a more efficient and participatory civic life.

### **What are your reflections on the impact of civil society in the gender equality movement?**

Governments follow strict rules; civil society organizations often create their own. When trust is established among partners, we're more willing to invest in one another. That trust – and the responsibility to maintain it – is ours to nurture.

Gender equality campaigns must be driven by a vision that serves the great good - “for the sake of a better world”. The success of these efforts also depends on us holding ourselves to the same standards we expect from governments. Forced solutions never work.

A healthy society is measured by how it treats its most estranged members – not just by healing their wounds, but by seeking out and valuing their perspective.

### **How can we ensure that grassroots organizations, young activists, and women's rights groups play a central role in shaping global gender equality commitments?**

It is a cycle of cause and effect. The best results will come when international organizations, governments, and citizens understand one another through respectful, ongoing interaction. The circle must stay open and the commitment must be mutual. Each stakeholder is essential to the global framework.

Women make up half of humanity - but beyond the numbers, women have a unique and irreplaceable role in the fabric of society, just as in their families. International organizations and institutions can collect data, analyze it, and make proposals about these issues.

We must also creatively engage young minds in shaping solutions to global problems. This is not only exciting – it gives purpose and direction. Girls want to envision their future without limits.

It's clear that recent UN administrations have made progress. Not long ago, youth - especially girls - were excluded even from family decision-making. Today, continued conversations with youth and respect for their historically overlooked opinions are accelerating change. Those with greater awareness also bear greater responsibility. That means us! We must support youth through town hall meetings, creative mentorship programs, science exhibitions, and grants for innovative ideas and programs.



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