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**Statement**

**by**

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**United Nations Under-Secretary-General**

**Executive Secretary**

**of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

**at**

**2021 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development side event:**

**“Empowering Women Through Rethinking the Care Economy: A Regional Analysis of  
Europe and Central Asia”**

**12 March 2021, 9:00 – 10:30 am CET**

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Colleagues and friends,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to the side event on “Empowering Women Through Rethinking the Care Economy: A Regional Analysis of Europe and Central Asia” today. It is jointly organized by the Government of Serbia, UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia and UNECE in the context of the UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development. As the world continues to battle the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, taking stock of policies and initiatives to address its adverse impacts on economies and societies and to recover better is imperative.

The COVID-19 and its socio-economic consequences have put a spotlight on pre-existing inequalities, including those based on gender. The crisis has exposed the population across the globe to higher risks and uncertainties that provoke new imbalances and aggravate gaps in many areas: from economic performance at state and company’s levels, as increased budget deficits and lost profits, to growing income differentiation of households and rising poverty.

Gender inequality is cutting across all these areas. We need to be mindful of how this crisis is amplifying the challenges and disadvantages faced by women in all regions and communities; we need to identify the root causes, design and implement policies and measures for a short-term response and develop longer-term strategies to build resilient societies.

And the care economy – both unpaid care and paid care work – is fundamentally intertwined with gender equality and women’s

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economic empowerment because of women's central and multiple roles in the provision of care: they provide the bulk of both paid and unpaid care work.

To support governments' efforts to scale up and expand their response to the immediate socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, the five UN regional commissions – ECA, ECE, ECLAC, ESCAP and ESCWA in partnership with UN Women– are implementing a UN Development Account project.

Today, I am very pleased to present the first findings of this project on its workstream on strengthening care economy policies for a sustainable recovery in the ECE region. These findings represent the results of the collaborative work of experts and networks of UNECE and the UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia. They provide evidence on regional trends in the care economy, on policies and initiatives already undertaken as a response to COVID-19 in UNECE member States, followed by recommendations for forward-looking action to empower women through closing the care gaps and investing in the care sector.

The regional assessments supported by national case studies on childcare and women's empowerment in Kyrgyzstan, Serbia and the Republic of Moldova are shedding light on the existing gender inequality and the crisis of care in the region. They highlight the interdependency of unpaid care work, paid work and paid care work as a necessity for women's economic empowerment.

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While you will learn in a few minutes about the regional and country studies more in detail, I would like to highlight a few key recommendations:

First, recognizing and rewarding care work needs to become reality through implementing measures to improve pay and working conditions in the paid care economy,

Second, reduce existing imbalances between paid and unpaid work through employment protection, leave and benefit entitlement schemes for those with dependents for all, both in formal and informal employment;

Third, promote measures and initiatives to redistribute the care responsibilities between women and men through providing flexibility in working, prioritizing and improving the reconciliation of paid work and private/family life for paid care workers in the frontlines of pandemic response;

Fourth, allocate sufficient financing to make quality childcare affordable for families and improve accessibility in both rural and urban areas;

Fifth, ensure that reliable data is systematically collected and compiled, including on paid and unpaid work and allocation of funds for care services.

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Finally, I would like to underscore that care has to be a clear political priority in the national responses and plans for recovery from the pandemic; it needs to be part of the economic and social policies and initiatives to recover better. And recovering better means seeing sustained investment in care as a vital pre-condition to inclusive growth and high quality of life for everyone.

I look forward to an insightful debate and innovative solutions on how to better value and organize the care economy for the benefit of all.

Thank you.

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