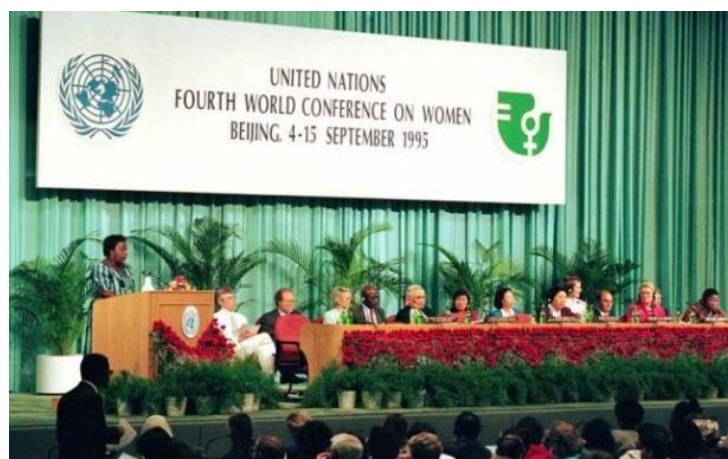




UN ECE Beijing +25 28 – 30 October 2019

25 years ago, in September 1994, women across the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) region, that is from Vancouver to Vladivostok and everywhere in-between, met in Vienna to prepare for the 4th World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in August 1995. With the help of Irene Hoskins, chair of the NGO Committee on Women in Geneva and representative of AARP, a US interest group addressing ageing issues, our European funded project giving the voice to older women across the 12 countries that made up the EU at that time, enabled older women from the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, UK and Ireland to participate. We were also able to include Armenia and bring a Russian speaker from my community in London to help with interpretation. You can imagine the excitement, hard work and at times confusion, trying to make sense of the United Nations' processes.



For the first time older women had a significant voice in the civil society forum. On behalf of the organizing committee, we took responsibility for the coordination of workshops under the 'health' theme and tried to ensure older women's contributions and challenges were recognized in some of the other themes, for example; access to work, poverty, violence.

The outcome of the 4th World Conference on Women in 1995 was the Beijing Platform for Action, an impressive forward-thinking document, signed by governments across the world, committing them to advancing women's equality and protecting our human rights. For the first time, such a key global document explicitly recognized older women as part of the diversity of women.

Last October 2019, some 500 civil society representatives and many member states from the ECE region met again to review progress on the actions identified in the Platform for Action (part of a 5-year cycle). Much has changed since those heady days in 1994/5. The United Nations (UN) is under pressure, we see the increase of totalitarian regimes with little regard for the human rights of their citizens, human rights defenders being killed with impunity and women's safe space shrinking. UN Women, the 'department' of the UN responsible for the meeting, has decided to focus on, and support, the voice of young 'feminists' seeing them as the 'torch bearers' for the future. They are about to launch the 'Generation Equality' campaign.

While it is laudable to support young women to engage with the global process and we met some really feisty young feminists, there was not enough space for intergenerational exchange, neither within the one-day civil society meeting nor within the 2-day official meeting. It felt that our efforts were going backwards, once again fighting to have our voices as older women heard and to be recognized as rights holders. The Civil Society opening statement referred to 'older women who have needs' – not the narrative we had contributed to! With sustained lobbying and effective dialogue with the organisers, we held our line, reinserted language into the opening statement (now on line) and one of our number, Sylvia Beales, Gray Panther representative from the UK was invited to give the final Civil Society Statement on the last day of the government meeting.



*Sylvia Beales, Gray Panthers,
& Elizabeth Sclater, OWN*

So, it was not all doom and gloom! There was an excellent side event on the implications of demographic change, where Anne Sophie Parent from AGE Platform Europe and Silvia Perel Levin from the NGO Committee on Ageing in Geneva, joined government representatives from Germany, Italy and France. Across the region women over 60 constitute about 50% of the region's women and contributions from the floor and specifically from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) representative to the ECE region, highlighted the need to stop thinking about the 'dependency' ratio, (the number of workers needed to support older people in retirement) and find a new way of thinking

about the economy and what older women are doing to contribute. Data from a recent meeting in the eastern Balkans indicated that older people, particularly older women, are contributing more to GDP in child and elder care than they are taking out of the economy in their very old age.



24 years after Vienna, one of the biggest changes in the whole process in consulting Civil Society across the region was the use of new technologies (ICT). If you are not connected via google and social media you are very much out of the loop. Over the months leading up to the meeting, the Civil Society Forum organisers (from the Women's Major Group) encouraged diverse constituencies to develop 22 factsheets, that reflected on progress on the 12 critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action, raise current issues and recommend change. We were encouraged to provide input into all factsheets through google drive. The factsheets also dealt with issues facing women in the sub-regions of the UNECE, for example, North America, Western Europe, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, the Balkans, central Asia, and women in all their diversity. Susan Somers from the International Network of the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA) convened us to contribute to the older women factsheet.

OWN at Regional Civil Society Forum

ICT is not my forte, so I had to learn fast about Google docs, Google notes, Zoom meetings in different time zones, etc. You really had to keep on the ball the whole time as, for a few weeks, we could all contribute to the text in real time, and so when you went back into the document it could have had substantial change!! But it was really good to work with the experts from across our region. I contributed material on the gender pension gap for the

economic barriers fact sheet, violence against women and of course on older women.

Finally, on the last day of the government meeting, the UK representative, from the Government Equalities Office, spoke about the work of the Council of Europe (CoE) to reach agreement on a common definition of sexism. No easy feat. On the basis of this understanding, CoE members made a commitment to developing country-specific programmes and projects to challenge sexism. A short video was also shown. Afterwards I spoke to the UK representative and suggested that perhaps the CoE could be encouraged to work on a common definition of ageism and in so doing might find themselves more in tune with the need for a binding legal instrument to protect the human rights of older people. I hope I am not misinterpreting his body language, but I could see him really thinking about what I was saying and he promised to give it more thought. Of course, we need to follow this up!



Andrea Ferenczi (OWN) reading the Older Women's NGO statement at Beijing +25

Our work in Geneva will be taken to New York, where at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March next year, the reviews from all the regions of the UN will be synthesized as part of the global review. We also suggested to the UK and Danish Representatives that 'Generation Equality' feature intergenerational dialogues, so we join together to make change. After the sixty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women ([CSW64](#)) in March, these ideas can be taken forward in the Generation Equality Forums to be held in Mexico in May and Paris in July.

You can find reports of the ECE meeting and more about the upcoming events on the UN Women website. www.un.org and Women's Major Group website.

by Elizabeth Sclater, Older Women's Network, Europe