

A Call to Action: Safeguarding SRHR in the UN80 Reform



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This proposal, developed by **the Global South Coalition for SRHR and Development Justice** and endorsed by **525 organizations and 93 individuals**, aims to ensure that sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) remain central to sustainable development and fully protected within the UN system within any future institutional configuration resulting from the UN80 reform, including—but not limited to—a potential merger of UNFPA and UN Women.

While the UN is exploring several structural options as part of UN80, this paper should **not** be interpreted as support for a merger between UNFPA and UN Women. Rather, regardless of whether a merger proceeds, **the current moment offers a rare and urgent opportunity to institutionalize SRHR as a strong, visible, well-resourced, and politically protected mandate at the center of the UN development system.**

In that spirit, the following proposal provides a forward-looking agenda designed to fortify SRHR leadership, mandates, resources, and accountability through the UN80 reform process.

We call on UN leaders and member states to:

1. **Guarantee ring-fenced and proportionate financing for SRHR**, maintaining current programmatic allocations and safeguarding budgets during periods of fiscal contraction.
2. **Strengthen political and technical leadership for SRHR and ensure high-level political visibility**, including:
 - An open, competitive selection of the Executive Director;
 - Appointing a UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for SRHR;
 - Preserving SRHR technical leadership; and
 - Safeguarding country- and regional-Level SRHR expertise and capacity.
3. **Build inclusive, accountable governance for SRHR leadership**, including:
 - Civil society seats on the Executive Board, with enhanced Global South representation;
 - A dedicated Youth Advisory Panel to ensure sustained youth leadership and accountability.
4. **Mandate robust SRHR accountability mechanisms**, including:
 - Annual reporting to the Commission on Population and Development (CPD) and ECOSOC or the General Assembly;
 - A strengthened State of World Population report that tracks policies and programmes, not only population trends.
5. **Strengthen system-wide SRHR coherence across the UN**, with HRP, WHO, UNAIDS, UNICEF, UNDP, and the World Bank.

6. **Rebuild and expand global data systems**, filling the gaps left by the dismantling of DHS and ensuring that SRHR indicators remain comparable, disaggregated, and consistently collected.
7. **Embed SRHR explicitly within development justice and the right to development**, linking SRHR to economic inclusion, social equity, climate resilience, and digital access.

Together, these measures would help to codify SRHR as a stand-alone, non-negotiable mandate in any future institutional arrangement, explicitly grounded in the ICPD Programme of Action, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

As the UN80 reform process explores potential structural adjustments—including a possible merger between UNFPA and UN Women—it is **essential to safeguard the integrity of the SRHR agenda**. SRHR has historically required dedicated leadership, specialized technical capacity, and clear institutional anchoring to ensure coherence across global norms, national implementation, and service delivery. Experience shows that when SRHR is absorbed into broader gender or development mandates without explicit articulation, it risks being deprioritized, underfunded, or rendered politically invisible.

For this reason, regardless of whether the institutional architecture changes, Member States and civil society must ensure that SRHR remains a **non-negotiable, stand-alone mandate** with clear scope, accountability, and resourcing. The proposals below would help to codify SRHR explicitly within any reconfigured entity and protect decades of normative progress, ensure continuity of health-system support, and strengthen the UN's ability to deliver on the SDGs, universal health coverage (UHC), and the ICPD Programme of Action.

Any reconfigured entity must enshrine SRHR as a core mandate including the promotion and protection of reproductive rights and the comprehensive package of SRH services:

- Contraceptive services;
- Maternal and newborn health;
- Safe abortion to the fullest extent of the law and post-abortion care;
- Adolescent SRHR;
- Prevention, diagnosis and treatment of STIs and HIV;
- Reproductive cancers;
- Prevention and treatment of infertility;
- Gender-based violence prevention and response;
- Population and development data systems; and
- Comprehensive sexuality education.

1. Guarantee ring-fenced and proportionate financing for SRHR

SRHR is a comprehensive, multi-faceted agenda that requires consistent, dedicated funding to ensure that it remains a priority at the global, regional, and national levels.

To prevent SRHR from being deprioritized or diluted within broader development or gender portfolios, dedicated and ring-fenced budget lines must be established. This should include maintaining proportional shares of programme resources for key mandates, based on existing allocations such as UNFPA's 2026–2029 budget framework (e.g., data and analysis; policy and accountability; social and gender norms; quality of care

and services; and humanitarian action). While there are areas of overlap—such as GBV in the case of UN Women—the goal should be to preserve proportionality in resources directed to core SRHR mandates, ensuring these resources do not shrink within a larger institutional structure.

Ring-fencing must also be operationalized in a way that protects SRHR if there is a budget contraction. In such cases, priority should be given to programmatic outputs most directly linked to SRHR delivery, such as quality of care and services, social and gender norms, and humanitarian SRHR action. Moreover, the content of each programme output in case of a new or merged entity must, at minimum, retain the full scope of what UNFPA currently includes under those outputs, preventing the redefinition or dilution of SRHR workstreams or the insertion of unrelated elements that weaken mandate clarity. These safeguards ensure continuity of SRHR programming, and guarantee that resources remain directed to essential health interventions, rights-based services, and gender-equality objectives.

2. Strengthen political and technical leadership for SRHR and ensure high-level political visibility

2.1 Open, Competitive Selection of Executive Director

Leadership is one of the most decisive factors shaping the visibility, ambition, and effectiveness of the SRHR agenda within the UN system. If the entity responsible for SRHR is reconfigured, the selection of its Executive Director must not be predetermined or politically negotiated behind closed doors. A transparent, merit-based, and open global search ensures that the ED possesses the technical credibility, political acumen, and diplomatic skill necessary to champion SRHR in a challenging geopolitical environment. Prioritizing candidates with demonstrated SRHR expertise will help safeguard the mandate, maintain continuity with ICPD and Beijing commitments, and provide Member States with confidence that the entity is led by someone capable of navigating institutional change while protecting essential rights and services.

2.2 Appoint a UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for SRHR

In challenging periods of institutional restructuring, SRHR requires high-level political visibility to avoid marginalization or mandate dilution. A Secretary-General's Special Envoy for SRHR would provide a clear, authoritative focal point for advocacy, coordination, and accountability across the UN system. This role is critical for ensuring coherence between agencies, elevating SRHR concerns in intergovernmental fora, and maintaining a consistent narrative about the centrality of SRHR to sustainable development, gender equality, and human rights. The Envoy would serve as a bridge between Member States, UN leadership, civil society, and technical agencies—helping to mobilize political support, address emerging risks, and sustain momentum for SRHR regardless of institutional changes resulting from the UN80 reform.

2.3 Preserve and strengthen SRHR technical leadership

Effective SRHR programming depends on sustained technical expertise that is deeply embedded across all levels of the UN system. SRHR requires specialized competencies in public health, human rights, data systems, gender equality, and service delivery—expertise that cannot simply be absorbed into broader portfolios without risking a loss of quality, coherence, and impact. As structural reforms are considered, it is essential that the UN maintain a dedicated SRHR technical spine capable of guiding normative work, supporting country programs, and ensuring accountability for global commitments.

Maintaining specialized SRHR expertise at headquarters, regional, and country levels, with clearly defined technical functions that cannot be diluted through administrative consolidation, is therefore fundamental to sustaining the agenda's effectiveness and visibility.

2.4 Safeguard Country- and Regional-Level SRHR Expertise and Capacity

SRHR impact is delivered primarily at country level, where UN technical specialists support governments in policy development, health-system strengthening, service delivery, supply chains, demographic analysis, and humanitarian response. Any reduction or dilution of SRHR-specific expertise would immediately weaken program quality, undermine national capacity, and reduce the UN's ability to uphold ICPD and Beijing commitments. Safeguarding strong SRHR teams in-country—particularly in lower-income and crisis-affected contexts—is therefore essential to ensuring continuity of services, maintaining trusted government partnerships, and enabling effective policy dialogue during and after structural reform. Furthermore, the UN80 reform process should also explicitly strengthen regional capacities and cooperation, recognizing the critical role of regional platforms in supporting country-level implementation while advancing and reinforcing regional agreements and commitments on SRHR.

3. Build inclusive, accountable governance for SRHR leadership

Strong governance is essential to safeguard SRHR in any future institutional arrangement. To prevent mandate dilution and ensure meaningful participation, the governance structure must embed civil society, create diverse advisory mechanisms, strengthen system-wide accountability, and guarantee transparency throughout the reform process. Governance arrangements should also ensure balanced representation of Member States, with particular emphasis on strong participation from governments of the Global South. In addition, there is value in participation from selected UN agencies and development partners whose mandates directly intersect with SRHR—such as WHO, UNICEF, and UNESCO, and the World Bank—to enhance collaboration and cross-sectoral accountability. This approach reflects elements of the UNAIDS model, creating meaningful space for those committed to advancing SRHR while maintaining the clarity and integrity of an intergovernmental governance structure.

3.1 Establish an Executive Board with Reserved Civil Society Seats

Effective SRHR leadership requires governance that reflects the voices of those most affected by policy decisions. Ensuring formal civil society representation—especially feminist, youth-led, Indigenous, and other organizations from the Global South (Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean), as well as Europe and North America—creates a power-sharing model that strengthens oversight, legitimacy, and accountability. Drawing from the UNAIDS example, where civil society holds regionally designated seats, a similar approach could be adapted here, but with a stronger weighting toward Global South representation and with formal representation for youth. For instance, Europe and North America could share one seat, alongside four seats for Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, ensuring that civil society voices from diverse geopolitical contexts are adequately represented. This structure would apply specifically to Executive Board representation; broader, constituency-based engagement could be addressed through a separate strategic advisory council or councils.

3.2 Establish a Youth Advisory Panel

In addition to formal governance structures, it is essential to create a dedicated mechanism that ensures the

voices, perspectives, and leadership of young people inform the entity’s strategic direction. A Youth Advisory Panel would provide structured, ongoing opportunities for adolescents and young people—especially those from the Global South and from communities most affected by SRHR policies—to contribute insights, identify emerging challenges, and ensure that programs remain responsive to real-world needs and lived experiences.

Such a panel would complement, but not duplicate, Executive Board representation by offering a focused space for youth engagement, fostering accountability, and strengthening the alignment of SRHR priorities with the realities faced by younger generations.

4. Mandate robust SRHR accountability mechanisms

4.1 Mandate Annual SRHR Reporting to the Commission on Population and Development and ECOSOC/GA

Accountability is foundational to maintaining SRHR visibility and political support. A regular, public reporting obligation ensures that progress and gaps remain at the center of intergovernmental debate, providing Member States with evidence to guide decision-making and resource allocation. A global SRHR accountability report to the Commission on Population and Development and ECOSOC or the General Assembly would provide an opportunity for taking stock of progress towards and challenges in achieving global goals and targets on SRHR agreed in the ICPD Programme of Action, Beijing Platform for Action, and Sustainable Development Goals, while also identifying new and emerging areas that need critical attention.

4.2 Strengthen the State of the World Population Report

The State of World Population Report should be strengthened to include policy and programme monitoring, not only population data. This would offer a more comprehensive picture of how commitments are being implemented, the quality and reach of SRHR services, and the degree to which countries are advancing rights-based approaches. Together, these reporting mechanisms would enhance transparency, deepen political engagement, and help sustain momentum for SRHR across the UN system.

5. Strengthen system-wide SRHR coherence across the UN

SRHR touches multiple domains—health systems, gender equality, human rights, humanitarian action, and sustainable development—making cross-agency coherence essential. Without explicit mechanisms for collaboration, mandates can become fragmented, duplicative, or contradictory. Strengthening coordination with WHO including the Human Reproduction Programme, UNAIDS, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, OHCHR, UNHCR, and the World Bank ensures that SRHR technical guidance, normative standards, and implementation strategies remain aligned across the UN system. In particular, leveraging the Human Reproduction Programme (HRP) at WHO reinforces scientific credibility, harmonizes global standards, and anchors SRHR within established technical and multisectoral channels.

6. Rebuild and expand global data systems

Effective SRHR policy and programming depend on reliable, comparable, and disaggregated data. Recent changes to global data architecture—including the dismantling of the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) Program—have created significant gaps in the availability of SRHR data. DHS has historically served as a cornerstone for tracking contraceptive prevalence, unmet need, maternal health, adolescent fertility, GBV prevalence, and other indicators critical to monitoring ICPD and SDG commitments. To avoid a decline in global

evidence and to safeguard comparability over time, the UN system must invest in robust, integrated data systems capable of generating the same level and quality of information previously provided by DHS. This includes strengthening national statistical systems, supporting population-based surveys, and expanding global monitoring frameworks with disaggregated data for adolescents, women, marginalized groups, and humanitarian populations. Without such investments, SRHR policymaking risks becoming less evidence-driven and more vulnerable to political distortion.

7. Anchor SRHR Within Development Justice and the Right to Development

SRHR must be positioned within the broader frameworks of development justice and the right to development providing political legitimacy of the agenda and expanding the coalition of governments willing to defend it. The right to development affirms that all people must be able to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from development processes. Yet these aspirations are unattainable without the fundamentals of reproductive autonomy, maternal and newborn health, access to contraception, bodily integrity, and freedom from violence. When individuals—particularly women, adolescents, and marginalized populations—lack control over their sexual and reproductive lives, their capacity to pursue education, secure decent work, participate in public life, and escape poverty is severely constrained.

Embedding SRHR across development policies—including education, labor markets, poverty reduction, climate resilience, digital inclusion, and demographic transitions—ensures an integrated approach that recognizes how SRHR both shapes and is shaped by broader social and economic systems. This interconnected framing resonates strongly with many Member States, especially across the Global South, who prioritize equity, justice, and inclusive development outcomes. It also repositions SRHR not as a standalone sectoral issue but as a prerequisite for sustainable development, strengthening its place within UN reform debates and broader global development agendas.

Conclusion

SRHR has long been recognized by the UN and its member states as a prerequisite to achieve gender equality and development. At a moment when SRHR is under threat, it is critical that any UN80 reform process preserve and protect this mandate to ensure continued progress towards the SDGs, as well as ICPD and Beijing, and the full realization of human rights for all.