

Key Actions to Strengthen the UN's Work on Gender Equality

Summary

At a time when gender equality and women's and girls' human rights are under increasing attack, the UN needs to take strategic, coordinated action to protect hard-won gains and support ongoing progress. The UN80 process offers an opportunity to strengthen the UN system's leadership and action to advance gender equality. The Global South Coalition on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Development Justice¹ is calling on the UN Secretariat, UN Agencies and Member States to:

- 1. Strengthen norms, laws and policies on gender equality and women's and girls' human rights, including by:**
 - a. Sustaining the UN's global norm-setting role on gender equality and women's human rights; and
 - b. Safeguarding the UN's expertise and capacity to translate global norms into national laws and policies.
- 2. Ensure accountable institutions for gender equality, including by:**
 - a. Strengthening accountability and coordinated action between UN entities at the global and regional levels;
 - b. Increasing accountability for gender mainstreaming by UN country teams; and
 - c. Closing gaps in gender data, research and analysis.
- 3. Strengthen women's rights and gender equality movements and access to resources, including by:**
 - a. Making civil society meaningful partners in governance; and
 - b. Increasing direct funding to women's rights and gender equality organizations, including through multi-donor trust funds.

¹ The Global South Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Development Justice works to strengthen political leadership and reframe global, regional and national narratives at the intersection of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), human rights, and development justice. It is co-convened by the Asia Pacific Alliance for SRHR (APA), Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), Fös Feminista, and the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Africa Trust (SAT), in collaboration with the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (PMNCH).

These actions represent key steps needed to ensure that the UN continues to be a champion for gender equality and delivers on its mandate to advance women's and girls' human rights, now and in the future.

Background

Through the UN80 reform process, the UN Secretariat, its agencies, member states and civil society are engaging in an active discussion about whether the UN system is set up to deliver effectively on its mandates in a moment of geopolitical turmoil. Financial resources for the UN's essential development, human rights, and peace-building work are being increasingly curtailed as governments fail to deliver on their obligations. The ability of multilateral action to solve intractable problems that cut across borders is being called into question as some powerful states are retrenching towards nationalism. At the same time, anti-rights actors around the world are coalescing to roll back hard won legal and policy gains for women and girls and undermine our human rights.

As part of the UN80 process, the UN Secretary-General has proposed for consideration by member states the merger of UN Women and UNFPA, arguing that bringing together two agencies that have distinct but complementary mandates would strengthen UN capacity to deliver for women and girls. An assessment of the proposed merger is underway, and the Executive Boards of the two agencies are expected to consider action over the coming months.

Without a doubt, efforts to strengthen the UN system's leadership and action to advance gender equality are urgently needed. However, the discussion about a potential merger is taking place without adequate consideration of alternative options to achieve greater impact, while potentially downplaying the risks that a merged entity may weaken the UN system's capacity and further constrain resources available to respond to the multitude of challenges to the human rights of women and girls.

Since UN Women was established in 2010 after the merger of four distinct organizations working on gender equality, it has become the UN system's leading advocate for gender equality and the human rights of women and girls. In this role, it has helped shape global norms on gender equality, strengthen gender machineries, support national-level legal and policy change, and mobilize collective action across the UN system, with governments and in partnership with civil society and the private sector. Its work has been important in driving meaningful change in the lives of women and girls around the world and shining a spotlight on the injustices and inequalities that continue to set us back. Yet, the scale and scope of the gender inequality problem globally and in countries remains large and is now at risk of growing.

The proposal for a merger of UN Women and UNFPA is taking place in a context where we are beginning to see the systematic abandonment of support for gender equality and women's and girls' human rights. At the national level, this is being manifested in the closure of gender ministries in a growing number of countries and cuts in budgets for programs that advance gender equality in more than half.² At the global level, it is seen in reductions in donor government support for women's rights and gender equality organizations, with declines in funding of more than 20% between 2020-2021 and 2022-2023,³ even before major declines in ODA in 2024 and 2025. Within the UN system, this is seen in the scale back of dedicated gender equality expertise within UN organizations and persistent failures to allocate sufficient resources towards gender equality programs: only 36% of the 75 UN entities who reported on UN SWAP implementation in 2024 met financial benchmarks on gender equality and women's empowerment.⁴

The gaps in funding and closure of gender machineries coincide with targeted political attacks on core gender equality priorities. Over the past several years we have seen increasing efforts from anti-rights organizations working in collaboration with government and private sector actors to roll back laws and policies guaranteeing women's political participation and leadership, responding to gender-based violence and ending harmful practices like child marriage, and protecting the bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls in their diversity, alongside a dramatic increase in technology-facilitated gender-based violence and harmful political rhetoric, online and offline. In this context, any action that would weaken the UN's work on gender equality would be a major setback.

This brief identifies key actions, irrespective of whether a merger is deemed helpful or harmful, to protect the UN's work on gender equality, now and in the longer term. It requires protecting dedicated resources and existing expertise, while strengthening coordination across the UN system with real accountability measures for progress towards shared goals, and shoring up the women's rights and gender equality organizations and movements that drive sustainable change.

1. Strengthen norms, laws and policies on gender equality and women's and girls' human rights

² UN Women (2025), Gender equality in 2025: Gains, gaps, and the USD 342 trillion choice, available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/gender-equality-in-2025-gains-gaps-and-the-342t-choice>.

³ OECD, Development Financing for Gender Equality Dashboard, available at <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/dashboards/development-finance-for-gender-equality.html>.

⁴ UN Women (2025), United Nations System-Wide Results: UN-SWAP 2.0 Summary, Analysis, and Key Insights 2018-2024, available at <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/2024-system-wide-swap-2-reporting-results-en.pdf>.

The UN has played an important role in creating space for advancing global norms on gender equality and supporting countries to translate them into local laws and policies. This work continues to be vital to ensure ongoing progress and respond to new and emerging threats to gender equality. Throughout the UN80 reform process, consideration should be given to how potential reforms can build on this work, by:

a. Sustaining the UN's global norm-setting role on gender equality

From Beijing to the SDGs, the UN has been critical in advancing global norms on gender equality precisely because of its convening capacity and ability to bring together governments, women's rights and gender equality organizations and movements, and other stakeholders, around a common vision.

The Generation Equality Forum demonstrated the demand for the UN's leadership in setting norms and catalyzing global action: it brought together governments, civil society, private foundations, and the private sector to generate new commitments and take coordinated action on a range of core gender equality priorities. It resulted in a new compact on women, peace and security and humanitarian action and the creation of new multi-stakeholder bodies to advance women's rights including a Global Alliance on Care and an Alliance for Feminist Movements, among other initiatives. The UN Commission on the Status of Women and linked regional processes continue to be critical forums for drawing attention to new and ongoing challenges in the struggle for gender equality, mobilizing new commitments, and increasing coordinated action.

The UN's convening, coordination and norm-setting role is unique and key to ongoing progress. It must be protected in any institutional reform process.

b. Safeguarding the UN's expertise and capacity to translate global norms into national laws and policies

Women's and girls' ability to live free from gender-based discrimination and violence and fully realize their human rights is determined by national laws, policies and norms. UN Women supports governments and women's rights organizations and movements to translate global norms into national laws, policies, and norms by strengthening local gender machineries, providing specific technical expertise and assistance, convening partners working on gender equality, and supporting and strengthening women's rights and gender equality organizations who are driving sustainable change.

The UN's work on gender-based violence illustrates the importance of this work: UN Women and its predecessors have contributed to the adoption of three regional treaties, including the 2025 African Union Convention on Ending Violence against Women and Girls, and the

passage of more than 1500 laws and policies to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in 193 countries since 1995.

At a time when a quarter of countries are facing significant risk of regression, the loss of specific gender expertise within country and regional offices would be a major setback. Priority should be given to safeguarding the UN's national-level support for:

- Developing, reforming, and reviewing laws and policies on gender equality;
- Aligning national development plans and policies with SDG 5;
- Strengthening institutions, including through capacity building for gender and other ministries and supporting technical advisors in government;
- Collecting, analyzing and using gender data and evidence for policy decisions;
- Engaging women's rights and gender equality organizations in decision-making; and
- Strengthening gender-responsive humanitarian, crisis and post-conflict responses, including implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

Maintaining specific gender expertise within agencies across the UN system will be important to ensure that countries are supported to address gender equality challenges across human rights, development and humanitarian spheres.

2. Ensure accountable institutions for gender equality

We know from decades of practice that progress on gender equality requires both dedicated funding and capacity, as well as deliberate integration of gender-focused approaches within other programs and initiatives. In addition to their own programmatic work in key areas, UN Women has a key role to play in coordinating action towards common goals across the UN system. The UN80 process should aim to increase accountability of institutions by:

a. Strengthening accountability and coordinated action between UN entities at the global and regional levels

While the Gender Equality Acceleration Plan and the UN SWAP 3.0 represent important contributions, UN system-wide collaboration and accountability could be significantly strengthened through more systematic and in-depth approaches.

For instance, women's economic empowerment is an important element of UN Women's overall programming. UN Women's strategy identifies many areas of concern such as women's labor force participation, paid and unpaid care, unequal resources, pay and opportunities, as well as digital inequalities and violence, and the impact of climate change on poverty and livelihoods. However, the large number of issues together with financial and

human resource limitations call for better leveraging of expertise and pooling of resources across the UN system. For example, **joint planning, budgeting, and accountability measures in areas where multiple UN agencies are working and can bring their distinct expertise to the table**—such as women’s economic empowerment—could generate new approaches and methods of work to increase impact, while reducing duplication. It could also increase accountability to ensure UN agencies allocate budgets to programs that advance gender equality and achieve their financial benchmarks. These, and other opportunities for strengthening programmatic impact should be explored more fully.

b. Increasing accountability for gender mainstreaming by UN country teams

At the country level, UN Resident Coordinators and Country Teams must also be accountable for and engaged in driving progress for gender equality by mainstreaming a focus on gender throughout the UN’s country-level technical support and programs. While the UN Country Team SWAP sets minimum standards for gender mainstreaming within country teams and in UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCFs), not all country teams participate. Further, there are still significant gaps in translating global norms into tangible improvements in gender equality and women’s empowerment at the country level. Fewer than half of country teams that reported in 2023 met minimum expectations for gender results within SCDFs and less than a quarter met minimum expectations for the allocation of financial resources towards initiatives that had a principal or significant focus on achieving gender equality.⁵

These shortfalls need to be addressed through specific action to increase accountability and action. For example, the UN can incentivize performance on gender equality within country teams by providing catalytic funding from the Spotlight Initiative and the joint SDG Fund to reward country-level collaboration, increase efficiency and impact, and unlock additional resources. UN Resident Coordinators can likewise be held accountable through specific performance indicators and objectives on gender equality. These, and other mechanisms, should be more fully explored to move from voluntary commitments to concrete results and increased capacity to deliver.

c. Closing gaps in gender data, research and analysis

UN Women plays an important role in strengthening countries’ capacities to collect and analyze gender data at the national level and in analyzing trends, progress and emerging areas for action at the global level.

⁵ UN Women, UNCT SWAP, available at <https://gendercoordinationandmainstreaming.unwomen.org/unct-swap>.

The Progress of the World's Women reports have provided important snapshots of progress and shortfalls, while deepening analysis and helping to build the field on key issues from women's economic empowerment to strengthening families and women's and girls' positions and roles within them.

The annual SDG Gender Snapshots have proven critical in tracking change over time against core gender indicators across the SDGs, including goal 5 on gender equality. They provide groundbreaking information on intersecting inequalities within and between countries and help identify areas where additional action is needed. Yet, we still face significant challenges in monitoring progress: we only have data to track 57.4% of gender indicators in the SDGs and for most indicators data is not collected frequently enough to measure change.

A major lacuna has been created by the closing of USAID, which over many decades has been the principal funder of the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) that began in 1984. More than 400 DHS surveys across over 90 LMICs have provided standardized, nationally representative data on fertility, health, HIV, and nutrition. Over time, DHS surveys have come to include reliable data on violence and gender inequality along multiple dimensions, norms and behaviors becoming one of the key sources of gender data globally. The DHS program is now under serious threat, especially in some of the poorest countries. Pooled funding coordinated and jointly managed by UNFPA and UN Women could plug the gap and ensure data continuity and availability for country-level policy and programming as well as comparability over time and across countries.

UN Women's data, analysis and research contribute to the evidence base for normative and programmatic action to advance women's and girls' human rights. This work is needed in areas where progress towards gender equality is already falling short, but also to identify the best strategies we can use to protect and advance women's rights in new and emerging areas, such as digitalization or responding to technology-facilitated gender-based violence. Safeguarding gender data collection, analysis and research, including through coordinated action across the UN system to close gender data gaps and strengthen evidence, must be a priority.

3. Strengthen women's rights and gender equality organizations and movements and access to resources

Long-term progress on gender equality is not possible if women and girls are not fully engaged in setting norms, advocating for legal and policy change, implementing programs, and demanding accountability. Yet, while the UN advocates for meaningful roles for women at the decision-making table, women's rights and gender equality organizations are often

excluded from key UN decision-making tables and funding for their work falls seriously short of need. As part of the UN80 process, the UN should work towards:

a. Making civil society meaningful partners in governance

Women's rights and gender equality organizations and movements were the drivers behind the creation of UN Women, through the GEAR Campaign, and have been fundamental to its success. Women's rights and gender equality organizations, in all their diversity, should be represented on the UN Women Executive Board and have an equal role to Member States in governance and decision-making. Representation could be geographic or constituency based, but should ensure their equal capacity to set agendas, oversee budgets and implementation, and fully engage in decision-making processes.

b. Increasing direct funding to women's rights and gender equality organizations, including through multi-donor trust funds

Evidence from multiple studies and systematic reviews has demonstrated that the presence of autonomous feminist and gender equality organizations and movements is the single most important factor in driving sustainable progress for women and girls at the country level. Yet women's rights and gender equality organizations and movements remain severely under-funded, a crisis that has become even more profound over the past year in the face of precipitous declines in ODA. A 2025 UN Women survey of 428 women's rights organizations working on gender-based violence found that more than a third had suspended or shut down programs; while more than 40% had scaled back critical life-saving services including shelters, legal aid and healthcare response services. Only 5% anticipated having the resources that they needed to sustain their work over the next two years.⁶

The **UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women**, the **Fund for Gender Equality**, and the **Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF)**, three multi-donor trust funds, provide critical resources to organizations on the front lines of addressing gender-based violence and humanitarian responses.

In 2025, the Trust Fund managed \$74.5 million in grants to 159 organizations working in 71 countries and territories; however, the need far outstrips the supply of resources.⁷

⁶ UN Women (2025). At Risk and Underfunded: How Funding Cuts are Threatening Efforts to End Violence against Women and Girls, available at: <https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/10/at-risk-and-underfunded-how-funding-cuts-are-threatening-efforts-to-end-violence-against-women-and-girls>.

⁷ Report of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women on the activities of the United Nations trust fund in support of actions to eliminate violence against women (15 Dec 2025).

Applications to the Trust Fund for its last round of funding amounted to \$1.5 billion. In 2024, the WPHF mobilized \$63.58 million and provided new grants to 227 partners, funding just 4.3% of the 5,164 proposals received.⁸

Sustaining and strengthening the UN's role in providing resources directly to women's rights and gender equality organizations is an urgent priority. It is one of the best and most critical investments the UN can make to advance gender equality and prevent backsliding.

Conclusion

At a time when gender equality and women's and girls' human rights are under increasing attack, the UN needs to take strategic, coordinated action to protect hard-won gains and support ongoing progress. Any institutional reform process must safeguard the UN's role in setting global norms and translating them into national and local action, strengthen its capacity to deliver effectively on its mandate from the local to global levels, and ensure that women's rights and gender equality organizations are empowered and supported to drive sustainable change. These actions represent key steps needed to ensure that the UN continues to be a champion for gender equality now, and in the future.

⁸ Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (2025). 2024 Annual Report. Available at: <https://wphfund.org/annualreport2024/>