

Everything Feminist and Gender Equality Organizations Need to Know About UN80: An Alternative FAQ on UN Women X UNFPA

QUESTION 01

What is the UN80 Initiative, and how could it affect gender equality?

The UN80 Initiative was launched by the Secretary General to respond to a confluence of crises affecting the United Nations. These include the failure of Member States to pay their dues; the disregard powerful states show the UN Charter and its organs when it suits them; and persistent and increasing inequalities between and within states that is making it increasingly difficult to find consensus on the most pressing issues of the day. More information about the UN80 Initiative and various proposals on the table can be found [here](#).

One key proposal on the table is merging UN Women and UNFPA, two institutions with critical mandates to advance gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

An assessment of the benefits and risks of a merger of UN Women and UNFPA is currently underway. It is being conducted by external consultants and staff of UNFPA and UN Women. It is led by a Steering Committee composed of the Deputy Secretary-General and the Executive Directors of UN Women and UNFPA. An initial presentation of the assessment methodology and approach is available [here](#).

The assessment is looking at the benefits and risks of a potential merger. Notably, other options to strengthen the UN's work on gender equality and SRHR are not being considered. Instead, the assessment will focus on the current baseline, the feasibility of a merger, the benefits and risks of a merger, and a limited set of pathways to a merger.

The first part of the assessment, examining the current baseline is available [here](#)

The Secretary-General will make a recommendation to the general assembly later this year, on whether the two agencies should merge and if so, what a merger could

potentially look like. Ultimately, any decisions about structural reforms will need to be taken by UN Member States and codified through a UN General Assembly resolution.

There is more need than ever to strengthen the UN's gender equality architecture and its ability to support SRHR. However, instead of developing a range of credible options through consultation with civil society, member states, impacted populations, and UN experts, we have been offered this single proposal, without a clear explanation of how it was developed or why other approaches were not considered.

In the context of the UN's budget and credibility challenges, there is no indication that consolidating two comparatively small agencies will materially impact the budget or increase the UN's efficacy. Feminist and gender equality organizations may instead wonder if these agencies are being used as political pawns.

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QUESTION 02

What problem is a merger proposal allegedly seeking to address?

Proponents of the merger argue that consolidation of UN Women and UNFPA would fix three main problems: under-resourcing, fragmented approaches to addressing gender equality throughout the UN system, and a stubborn lack of progress on gender equality and SRHR globally. There is no evidence to support these assertions.

A merger is unlikely to fix these problems. In fact, these are the very challenges that UN Women was created to address in 2010, as a merger of four other UN entities—UNIFEM, INSTRAW, OSAGI and DAW. Instead, as Fos Feminista has observed in their [analysis](#) of the proposed merger, “consolidation would weaken institutional capacity for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), dilute gender equality mandates, and dismantle specialized infrastructure that has taken three decades to build.”

What’s more, the question of a merger between UN Women and UNFPA has already recently been considered. The [2023 assessment](#) of the UN system’s work on gender equality, commissioned by the Secretary-General, strongly recommended against it. It noted that disadvantages of a merger include:

- Reducing other entities’ focus on and accountability for this agenda;
- Increased conflict of interest between operational and coordination roles on gender equality by creating a large-scale entity that carries out both functions;
- Risks of a merged entity emerging as weaker in funding and/or influence given the geopolitical climate around women’s rights;
- Expenditure of system resources and energies to re-open entity mandates, in a context where the focus needed to be on all entities delivering more effectively on their existing mandates; and
- Loss of comparative and strategic advantage around issues of SRHR, where UN Women can advocate more forcefully for rights-promotion in contexts where UNFPA has to be more cautious in order to protect core operational work for example, on maternal and reproductive health.

These risks have not changed. If anything, they have increased.

QUESTION 03

What are the risks of a merger?

In the current context, the risks are significant. As the [UN80 Initiative FAQ notes](#), they include:

- Risks to mandate protection in intergovernmental processes;
- Politicization of gender equality and SRHR language;
- Disruption to humanitarian services and procurement systems;
- Workforce integration challenges;
- Transition costs and funding volatility;
- Donor uncertainty; and
- Disruption of existing relationships and expertise.

These risks cannot be overstated. Additionally, a merger risks reduced funding to women’s rights and gender equality organizations and movements, weakened gender machinery, and potential disruptions to country-level programs.

A merger is not likely to reduce politicization of these agendas. Instead, it may increase political opposition by giving anti-rights actors a powerful target through which they could attack both agendas.

These concerns underscore the need for a deeper, more transparent analysis of the risks. The Feminist UN80 Cross-Coalition Working Group has developed and shared with Member States a series of questions that outline several key concerns still requiring answers. [For more detail, see the Feminist UN80 Cross-Coalition Working Group’s letter to Member States.](#)

QUESTION 04

Would a merger increase coordination on gender equality and reduce fragmentation?

Not necessarily. UN Women and UNFPA are two distinct organizations, with different mandates, and different modes of working.

UN Women shapes norms, laws and policies, catalyzes coordinated UN system-wide action, and supports country-level programs to advance gender equality and women’s and girls’ human rights, with a focus on economic empowerment, political participation and leadership, gender-based violence, and peace, security and humanitarian actions.

UNFPA on the other hand plays a stronger operational role in the UN system, providing critical support to

countries to strengthen access to sexual and reproductive health services, including in humanitarian and conflict settings. It also responds to changing population dynamics, such as aging, migration, and addressing the needs of adolescents and young people. While it works to advance the human rights of women and girls to bodily autonomy and to be free from violence, gender equality is just one of its many goals.

An initial **baseline analysis** of the two agencies, conducted as part of the formal assessment of a merger and published this month, states:

UNFPA and UN Women operate at different scales and with different cost structures. There is limited duplication and high complementarity. UNFPA programmes are fewer, larger, and predominantly national in scope, consistent with a delivery and systems mandate. UN Women programmes are more numerous, smaller, and often multi-scope (national, regional, global), consistent with a normative, coordination and operational mandate. In 2024, UNFPA and UN Women played distinct but mutually reinforcing roles in advancing gender equality, women's rights, and reproductive health across development and humanitarian contexts.

The overlaps between the work of UN Women and UNFPA are extremely limited. Furthermore, as Fos Feminista's **analysis** notes, "The evidence suggests that poor coordination stems from unclear roles and responsibilities, not from institutional separation, and that these agencies already coordinate effectively on shared priorities."

Instead of elevating the UN's work on gender equality, there is a significant risk that merging the two entities would subsume gender equality within a broader mandate that includes SRHR, population dynamics, and the needs of older people and youth, making it just one of many important priorities.

Nor would a merger alleviate the need for coordination on gender equality across the UN System. All UN Entities and Country Teams have responsibilities to advance gender equality within their mandates. In fact, in response to a 2023 evaluation of the UN system's work on gender equality, the Secretary-General spent almost two years working on a UN **Gender Equality Acceleration Plan** to increase coordination, accountability and action. This plan has not yet been fully implemented. UN entities and country teams are still falling short of their obligations. UN Women's coordination unit has not been sufficiently resourced to effectively play its coordination role. To fix these challenges we need political leadership and real accountability. This will not be solved with a merger.

A merger risks further siloing the UN's work on gender equality and SRHR within one entity, instead of the coordinated, systemwide action that is needed to withstand the challenges to both issues that we are currently facing.

QUESTION 05

Would a merger increase efficiency and reduce costs?

The **UN80 FAQ on the merger** notes that the merger itself is not a cost-cutting exercise; in the short term at least it would increase costs because of the need to ensure a responsible transition and safeguard programs. Because there is so little overlap in the mandates and work of the two organizations, programmatic efficiencies are unlikely.

There are potential steps that can be taken to cut costs within these agencies and many other UN functions, such as having joint back offices and co-locating country offices, that can take place without a merger. The agencies are already undertaking cost-savings measures, including by relocating staff to lower-cost locations.

QUESTION 06

Would a merger increase resources for gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights?

Proponents of a merger say that it could attract more resources by strengthening branding and increasing coherence. However, that is highly unlikely. .

Funding for gender equality and women's and girls' human rights has been significantly scaled back over the past year. The donor governments that have given most generously to support these issues are slashing their development budgets and looking for further opportunities to save costs. It is unrealistic, as some noted at the Executive Boards, to think that they would simply combine their existing contributions and continue to give at the same level.

The reality is that the level of investment in both organizations already falls far short of needs. When UN Women was established, the UN Gender Equality Architecture Reform Campaign (GEAR Campaign), led by feminists from around the world) called for a \$1 billion annual budget. We have never come close. In the current environment, a merger is likely to mean fewer resources, not more.

QUESTION 07

Would a merger benefit governments and partners at the country level where the two entities work?

UN Women and UNFPA work with significantly different stakeholders at the country level, within government and outside of it. A merged entity will still need to engage a broad range of government, civil society and private sector partners. Instead, the real risk is that technical expertise, political power and capacity at the country level may be reduced with fewer staff to implement a broader mandate.

What's more, UN Country Teams under the leadership of Resident Coordinators are already supposed to be coordinating to develop unified sustainable development cooperation frameworks that include gender equality. They could already take action to reduce duplication, clarify accountability and create efficiencies. It is worth asking why there is no assessment of the role that Resident Coordinators are playing to ensure coordination and coherence at the country level.

QUESTION 08

Will existing mandates on gender equality and SRHR be reopened?

This is a serious risk. The UN80 Initiative FAQ argues that the mandates should not change and that a merged entity would continue to bear responsibility for implementing core agreements like the Beijing Platform for Action, the ICPD Programme of Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. However, at the UN Women Executive Board meeting, the Deputy Secretary-General said there are no guarantees that mandates would not be reopened and that responsibility rested with member states: "The Secretary-General does not open mandates, member states do."

For the merger to take place, the General Assembly will need to pass a resolution. There's no way to assure that the Member States that have been systematically attacking gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights in the General Assembly and at the Commission on the Status of Women and other forums, will not take the opportunity to try to end or water down the UN's work on both agendas.

QUESTION 09

How have UN Member States responded to the merger proposal?

At the Executive Board Meetings of UNDP/UNOPS/UNFPA and UN Women, which took place in February, Board Members expressed concern about the risks of a potential merger and asked for a full range of options to increase the efficiency and impact of the UN's work on gender equality and SRHR beyond a merger.

The Executive Boards decisions demanding all information necessary to make an informed decision, including:

A legal opinion from the UN Office of Legal Affairs addressing how mandates could be protected and implications for governance;

- Alternative options to a merger;
- A complete, unredacted merger assessment;
- Risk assessments and a risk register;
- A cost-benefit analysis;
- Timeline for consultations; and
- Summaries of all stakeholder consultations.

They also called for transparent, inclusive processes and clear timelines for decision-making.

The UN Women Executive Board **Decision** further called for clarity about the Women, Peace and Security mandate, among others, and for specific information on the potential implications on the Commission on the Status of Women.

The vocal mobilization of feminist and gender equality organizations has been essential in ensuring that Member States that do support gender equality and SRHR speak up, ask questions, and protect the work of UN Women and UNFPA. Continued advocacy will be essential as consideration of a merger moves forward.

QUESTION 10

How has civil society been engaged?

While the UN80 Initiative FAQ says that there have been structured consultations with civil society, this has not been the case. So far consultation with civil society has been limited at best. To date, it has consisted of one town hall with the Deputy Secretary-General and the Executive Directors of UNFPA and UNFPA, open to a few hand-picked organizations, with limited opportunity to engage. More consultations are planned at the regional level, but there is currently no clear and structured process for the diversity of feminist,

women's rights, and gender equality organizations to weigh in on this issue.

As the UN80 FAQ notes, civil society "perspectives are critical to assessing impact and feasibility." We need to continue to demand a place at the table and a role in decision making.

QUESTION 11

Has a decision been made?

Not yet. Feminist civil society is organizing to influence the decision, but we need many more voices at the table and louder collective advocacy.

There are multiple opportunities to have an impact. During the CSW, civil society representatives should seize the opportunity to engage states on these questions.

Once the assessment is complete, it will be presented to a joint session of the UNDP/UNOPS/UNFPA and UN Women Executive Boards.

In June, the Secretary-General will make a final decision about whether to recommend a merger to Member States.

Between June and September, Member States will negotiate a resolution on UN80 that may or may not include a decision about the merger.

Throughout the year, civil society engagement in capitols around these concerns will be crucial.

QUESTION 12

What can we do at the CSW?

Feminist and gender equality organizations are mobilizing. The UN Commission on the Status of Women offers some key opportunities.

The Secretary-General's town hall with civil society on Tuesday, March 10 will be an important moment to voice our concerns and ask critical questions.

An event on the UN Gender Equality Acceleration Plan on Wednesday, March 11 offers another opportunity to ask questions of the Deputy Secretary-General and the UN Women Executive Director.

Advocate with your country's delegations to the CSW and to mission representatives.

Talk about it in your CSW Side Events and use them as an opportunity to share your views and engage others.

Bring more people to the conversation and create spaces for member states to hear directly from feminist and gender equality organizations.

QUESTION 13

How can we mobilize over the longer term?

Now is the time for coordinated and strategic mobilization from feminist and gender equality organizations.

You can:

- Join the Feminist Cross-Coalition UN80 Working Group and support the actions planned. Reach out to Women's Rights Caucus, Young Feminist Caucus, Women and Gender Climate Constituency, International Sexual and Reproductive Rights Coalition, and the Women's Major Group. Join the listserv [HERE](#).
- Raise your questions and make demands on social media. Please stay on the lookout for our Social Media Toolkit!
- Reach out to UN Women and UNFPA staff at headquarters and at the country level and demand structured opportunities to be consulted and to weigh in.
- Share this and other information, such as the UN80 feminist cross-coalition WG letter, or this document, with your networks.
- Leverage your relationships with your own and other governments to oppose the merger proposal.