

UN WOMEN: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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The 2010 creation of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (or UN Women) represented an unusual organizational consolidation instead of the typical proliferation. It had a promising start under strong leadership but faces serious challenges with growing resistance to gender equality.

Support for women's rights has a long and checkered history in the United Nations. One of the earliest intergovernmental commissions was the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which first met in 1947 – an annual forum at which governments focus on a priority theme, review progress, and adopt non-binding resolutions about policies that would make a difference to women. But the UN system from its inception lacked strong institutional arrangements to provide intellectual leadership about gender equality; support governments to translate commitments into action; and help translate women's aspirations into reality.

The CSW initiated the process that led to the 1979 General Assembly resolution 34/180, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This bedrock of women's rights was the first human rights instrument to make the state responsible for what happened in the private sphere of domestic violence. UN conferences—Mexico City in 1975, Nairobi in 1985, and Beijing in 1995—provided platforms for governments to agree on priorities and for the women's movement to network, share experiences, and campaign to expand the frontiers of gender equality.

A long-standing demand of the women's movement had been the creation of a single UN institution that could spearhead change. The 2010 General Assembly resolution 64/289 created UN Women and was a symbolically important bridge between rhetoric and action; it was a welcome consolidation almost unprecedented in the UN's life. The four component parts were the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) that provided grant funding for women's projects in developing countries and was part of the UNDP family of institutions; the Institute for Training And Research on Women (INSTRAW) that was headquartered in Santo Domingo and pursued "action research"; the Division for Advancement of Women (DAW) that was located within the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and prepared documents for intergovernmental deliberations; and the Office of

the Special Adviser on Women (OSAGI) that was responsible for tackling gender equality within the UN.

THE CHALLENGES

Many gains have been registered in women's empowerment and rights, but discrimination and gender inequality persist worldwide. Despite increasing visibility and political mobilization, violence against women continues unabated. An average of 35 percent of women worldwide experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetimes, and this percentage reaches 70 percent in some countries.¹ Reproductive health and rights are not guaranteed in many countries. Globally women earn on average 24 percent less than men, but with variations from 33 percent less in South Asia to 14 percent less in Middle East and North Africa.² Women in all countries bear a disproportionate burden for unpaid care, and insufficient investments in basic infrastructure such as water and sanitation and in basic social services accentuate this burden. Women's political participation has expanded, largely through affirmative action, but few countries have crossed 30 percent participation of women in parliament. In armed conflicts, the situation is exacerbated because sexual and gender-based violence are increasingly used as weapons of war. Women are not present and their needs are not consistently considered in peace negotiations and post-conflict recovery.

UN Women was established amid a backlash on women's rights in many parts of the world, as a number of hard-fought gains have been questioned by conservative forces; and fundamentalist groups across the religious spectrum—Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism—have attacked women's rights, such as reproductive and property rights and access to public spaces. In some countries, rather than expanding the legal framework for equality, revisions were introduced and rights restricted, notably on LGBT rights. Economic crises have accentuated inequality with spill-over on gender inequality. Austerity measures that have cut social services in many European countries, for instance, have deepened

the burden of unpaid care and increased inequality. Women have faced multiple forms of discrimination with gender inequality intersecting such other inequalities as those based on race, class, and caste. Violent extremism has shared a common feature—attacks on women’s rights as in the actions of Boko Haram. Women’s organizations have been weakened and marginalized. The fear of pushback to previous gains led to the decision *not* to hold a Fifth World Conference on Women that was expected in 2015.

Three crucial elements of the new organization drew from previous mandates and earlier work. First, UN Women continued to work on all three pillars of the UN—human rights, development, and peace and security. However, debates leading to its creation included opposition to using “women’s rights” in the name, which reflected the atmosphere of resistance to gender equality. Second, UN Women’s universal mandate supported gender equality everywhere and not only in developing countries. Third, the organization was tasked with normative, development, and coordination mandates. In keeping with the umbrella resolution on coherence within the UN system, a key new element was to support and make the UN system accountable for contributing to gender equality.

As a patchwork of existing offices, the governance of UN Women reflected two inherited planning and funding streams. As a recipient of limited funds from the UN’s assessed budget, UN Women prepared a biennial Strategic Framework and Budget for General Assembly approval. As a development organization, UN Women is largely funded by voluntary contributions and is governed by its Executive Board. The Five-year Strategic Plan is modelled on the UN’s other development funds and programs and is in line with the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review.

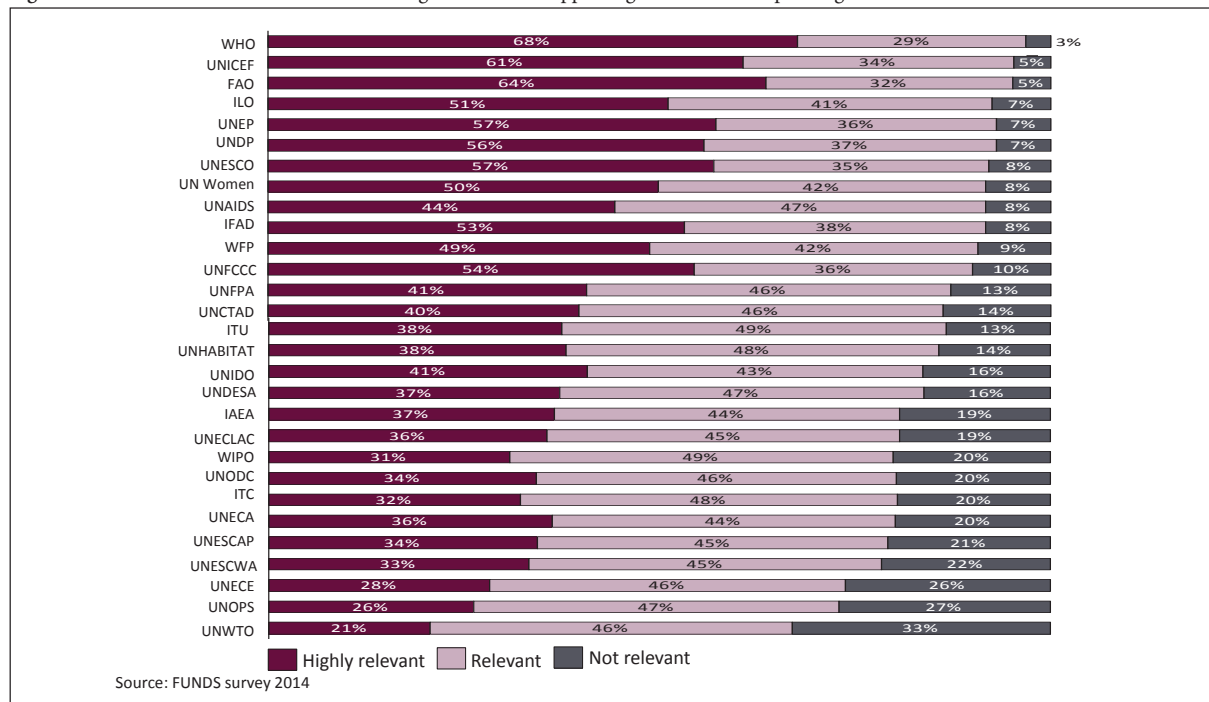
EARLY ACHIEVEMENTS

The first three years, under the strong leadership of Michelle Bachelet, former and now current president of Chile, focused on institution building, setting priorities, and engaging with such critical international processes as Rio+20 and the Fourth International Conference on Aid Effectiveness. One achievement was the rapid implementation of regional offices and an expanded country presence mirroring the arrangements of other UN development organizations. Staff from the predecessor organizations received assignments within the new structure and were complemented by new recruits. Significantly, all but one member of senior management came from outside the previous offices.

Thematic priorities of UNIFEM, the largest of the predecessor organizations, were endorsed by the new Executive Board. These themes were political participation; economic empowerment; ending violence against women; and women, peace, and security. They were expressed through programmatic work at the country level, policy and analytical work, and engagement with intergovernmental processes.

UN Women’s seat at the country-team table increased engagement with the rest of the UN development system. The organization was accepted as the 11th co-sponsor of UNAIDS, thus ensuring the inclusion of the specific needs of women in the battle against HIV. The inter-agency group of gender offices in all UN organizations was reactivated, and a framework for accountability (the System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality) was adopted, and each UN organization required to set targets and self-monitor and report performance on a common set of indicators. A common gender marker was adopted to enable the UN to have a common report on results. As Figure 1 reveals, UN Women is already

Figure 1: Relevance of UN Women and other organizations in supporting the UN’s development goals



recognized by members of the global public as one of the more relevant UN organizations.

At the inter-governmental level, given the increasing resistance to gender equality in many countries, UN Women faces a growing challenge to reaching agreement on significant issues of gender equality. In 2012 the CSW failed to reach consensus on the draft of agreed conclusions about a priority theme that appeared innocuous—rural women. Governments failed to reach agreement, but UN Women was tainted by the setback.

2013's priority theme on Ending Violence against Women was more controversial, as a decade earlier CSW had failed to achieve an agreed outcome on this topic. Condemnation of violence against women is universal, but evidence-based policy falls far short of what is needed. UN Women marshalled its internal resources and mobilized partners, including other UN agencies and women's organizations, and prepared analytical reports to ground inter-governmental discussions. Agreed conclusions were adopted that, in fact, pushed the normative frontier in a number of areas, including actions to prevent violence.³ Heads of UN organizations issued a joint statement to end violence against women.⁴ The conclusions marked a coming of age of UN Women and were recognized as such by women's movements and governments alike. It was a bittersweet moment, coinciding with Bachelet's resignation in order to return to Chile to run (successfully) for president.

UN Women influenced other inter-governmental processes and international conferences. For the first time, in 2011 General Assembly resolution 66/130 treated women's political participation. Governments agreed to include references to women in the final text of the Rio+20 Conference, but it was difficult to give substance to a gender perspective on sustainable development through the negotiations and in the outcome document. This was more fully analyzed in the *2014 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*.⁵ And in Busan at the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, UN Women was a successful advocate for the inclusion of gender equality in the main text and the adoption of a separate text on gender-equality commitments.⁶

UN Women has championed women, peace, and security. Since its path-breaking 2000 resolution 1325—which recognized women not just as victims of violent conflict but also as key participants and leaders of conflict prevention, peace negotiations, peace building, and economic and social recovery—the Security Council has encouraged a paradigm shift on issues of women, peace, and security. The annual open discussions were complemented with briefings by the executive director on specific country situations. At the General Assembly, resolutions on small arms and rule of law reflected gender equality. UN Women has collaborated with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations to conduct joint training on sexual violence and with the Department of Political Affairs on elections. At the country level, UN Women has provided advisers to UN peacekeeping and special political missions; and it has supported investigations by a variety of tribunals and other

processes with experts who establish the basis for combating impunity after an armed conflict ends.

UN Women has paid special attention to improving the evidence base on gender equality, including the support of national statistical offices. UN Women's Research and Data Unit has partnered with the UN Statistical Division, the World Bank, and national governments to implement a global initiative to pilot methodologies through national systems to set international standards for data collection.⁷ UN Women's Evaluation Office has worked with other UN agencies to collect and compile evidence from all gender-related evaluations.

Some of the most important breakthroughs for UN Women have come in the realm of ideas, analysis, and influence. *The World Survey on the Role of Women in Development* was mentioned, and the flagship publication, *Progress of the World's Women*, has provided an analytical framework captured in the sub-titles of the last two, *In Pursuit of Justice* (2011)⁸ and *Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights* (2015).⁹

The formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offered UN Women the opportunity to highlight as universal priorities the structural issues of gender equality, absent from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The focus for the MDGs had been on basic social services and women's participation where data was available. Targets were set in terms of achieving parity, which meant that low achievement by boys and girls or men and women were considered sufficient. The MDGs had not addressed the structural foundations of gender equality, despite widespread criticism from feminist scholars in particular and the women's movement more generally.¹⁰

The CSW's 2014 priority theme was to review the MDGs from a gender perspective. UN Women exposed uneven progress and the lack of policy attention to achieving even the low hanging fruit that were reflected even in selected targets.

UN Women sought to frame the emerging SDGs within the framework of human rights and gender equality. Together with UNICEF, for example, UN Women led a global virtual consultation on inequality.¹¹ UN Women worked with women's organizations and feminists to shape national MDG reports and national consultations on SDGs. Rather than addressing women's issues in isolation, this engagement enabled UN Women to permeate all sustainable development issues with gender equality.

SDGS AND THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

A key 2013 contribution was *A Transformative Stand-Alone Goal on Achieving Gender Equality, Women's Rights and Women's Empowerment: Imperatives and Key Components*.¹² The document marked a departure from the MDG approach and highlighted structural issues of women's rights—including the unequal burden of unpaid care work, violence against women, and reproductive rights. It identified target areas of freedom from violence;

capabilities and resources; and voice, leadership, and participation. At the same time, UN Women called for mainstreaming critical gender-equality targets in other goals. In another departure, the organization recommended that indicators for all targets not just be disaggregated by sex but capture specific dimensions of gender inequality.

The success of this effort can be measured by Goal 5 in the SDGs, which was crafted by the Open Working Group of member states. For the first time, key structural issues of gender inequality were included in universal commitments.

Under the leadership of the second executive director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN Women has pursued partnerships to make gender equality everyone's business. A major effort is the "HeforShe Campaign," which encourages men and boys to become champions of gender equality.¹³ On the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Conference, a global campaign sought to capture the imagination of young people for whom Beijing was history.

CONCLUSION

UN Women has made strides in its first five years, but a long road lies ahead. Gender inequality remains pervasive, and UN Women requires partners. As a young organization, it faces challenges of funding, capacity, and priority-setting. It should identify ways to go beyond being a development organization and give substance to its universal mandate, in particular by addressing gender inequality everywhere. As new programs are developed, new partners should help take the effort forward with UN Women catalyzing broader action. Due diligence is essential especially in partnering with the private sector. UN Women's roots are in the women's movement, and the strong links with women's organizations should be sustained and expanded. UN

Women should continue to push the frontier of ideas so that structural and persistent issues of gender inequality are better understood and addressed.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is to explicitly address women's rights. While UNICEF is closely associated with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN Women's work is largely shaped by the "softer" (in terms of international law) Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Unlike them, CEDAW is a human rights instrument that requires all countries to report periodically to the CEDAW Committee of Experts and act on their recommendations. The CEDAW process allows engagement by women's organizations that prepare shadow reports to the government's official report, and the CEDAW Committee takes them into account. UN country teams also provide confidential reports to the CEDAW Committee, and UN Women makes an important contribution to bringing the UN system together in this effort in countries where they are present.

UN Women could do more to influence governments, civil society, and the UN system around CEDAW and its implementation. Various women's movements have suggested that UN Women should have a mandate for expert reviews of critical issues similar to special rapporteurs in order to highlight common challenges to women's rights that affect numerous countries and contexts. A stronger reflection of and engagement with CEDAW both in process and substance would help ground UN Women more firmly in human rights and thereby strengthen its universal mandate. Such a move is critical for UN Women to contribute to the achievement of substantive equality for women and girls, which requires nothing less than the transformation of political, economic, and social institutions and the attitudes and norms on which they are constructed.

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NOTES

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