

UNITED NATIONS
UNIVERSITY

UNU-IIGH

International Institute
for Global Health

THINK PIECE SERIES 2022

THE POWER OF...

THE COLLECTIVE

Collective Power for Gender Equality:

An Unfinished Agenda for the UN



**ZINEB TOUIMI-BENJELLOUN
AND JOANNE SANDLER**

August 2022

DOI: 10.37941/QLST4565

**Gender &
Health Hub**

Knowledge. Policy. Action.





INTRODUCTION

In April 2020 – barely a month after the world began lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19 – the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), António Guterres, issued a policy brief on the impact of COVID-19 on women [1]. The brief was a clarion call for the world to respond to the shadow pandemic of violence against women and girls, increasingly evident in the context of lockdowns, and the disproportionate economic impacts on women, including gaps in healthcare, as well as the gruelling level of domestic responsibilities that many women continue to face. This was followed, in June 2020, by an inter-agency statement on violence against women and girls in the context of COVID-19, with nine UN organisations represented [2].

The urgency and willingness of the Secretary-General to warn how gender inequality exacerbates, and is exacerbated by, COVID-19, and the consequent convergence of UN organisations on generating research data and producing policy statements stands in stark contrast to the decades of feminist advocacy that was required to galvanise the UN’s attention – and resources – with respect to the gender dimensions of HIV/AIDS despite repeated warnings about how gender inequality was fuelling the HIV/AIDS pandemic [3]. Was this change an indicator of increasing willingness among UN agencies to coordinate on advancing gender equality? Did it signal that UN reform, with its strong emphasis on UN coordination and inter-agency responses, was yielding results? Or was this a consequence of having a dedicated agency – UN Women – with high-level representation on the Secretary-General’s management team? Who wrote the Secretary-General’s timely April 2020 policy brief (incisive gender analysis is not routinely produced by speech-writing teams – it requires expertise in gender equality and research)?

Was the UN’s alacrity in identifying the gender-based impacts and drivers of COVID-19 a result of women now comprising 50% of Heads of UN agencies, as well as Resident Coordinators and other high-level leadership, together with a commitment to achieve gender parity throughout the UN system? Or was it an outcome of having a Secretary-General who calls himself a feminist? Did leadership initiatives of this type catalyse greater cooperation at country level in the COVID-19 response? Understanding which of these potential drivers of feminist leadership make a difference is vital to a future where the UN more effectively mobilises its collective power for gender equality at all levels.

“Why is coordination anything more than a bureaucratic obsession? Coordination is the most thankless job in any bureaucracy. You have to push others to do work they are not qualified for and do not want to do. You have no resources. Your good performance means nothing, delivers no promotions, no headline news. You have no sanctions – no one will be fired for failing to deliver. You have to rely mostly on unpaid or under-rewarded focal points. This is no mere bureaucratic quibble. Coordination is no fun!”

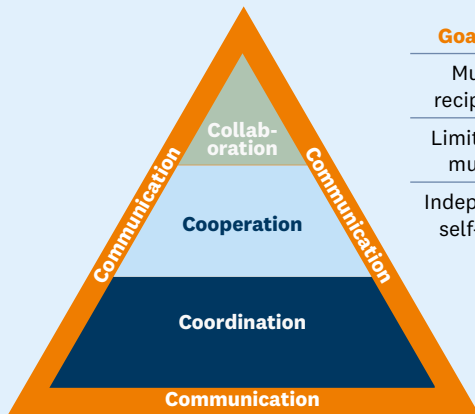
*Anne Marie Goetz, Clinical Professor,
Center for Global Affairs, New York University*

We wrote this piece in order to provoke readers to think critically about why and how a major paradigm shift is required in the way we conceive, talk about, and enact coordination for gender equality in the UN. The catalyst for this article was our involvement in a 2021 study that the UN University International Institute for Global Health (UNU-IIGH) co-produced: *What Works in Gender and Health in the UN – Lessons Learned from Successful Case Studies of Gender Integration Across Five Agencies* [4]. The study offers a powerful commentary on what is required to place gender equality at the centre of the UN system, as it faces critical and life-affirming opportunities, challenges and emergencies. Around 40 interviews with staff across five UN organisations (UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, and WHO) identified which ingredients are critical for the successful integration of gender equality based on 14 case studies. However, UN coordination, cooperation, and collaboration were rarely mentioned (see Figures 1 and 2 for an elaboration of these terms). Despite testimonials regarding specific country programmes, references to inter-agency coalitions, gender-theme groups, the consolidated UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) [5], and the convening power of the Resident Coordinator system were, for example, barely considered relevant to successes in gender equality at the country level.

Figure 1. The four Cs of partnerships [6]

Can the UN “C” its way to gender equality?

Relationships: Collaboration, Cooperation, Coordination & Communication



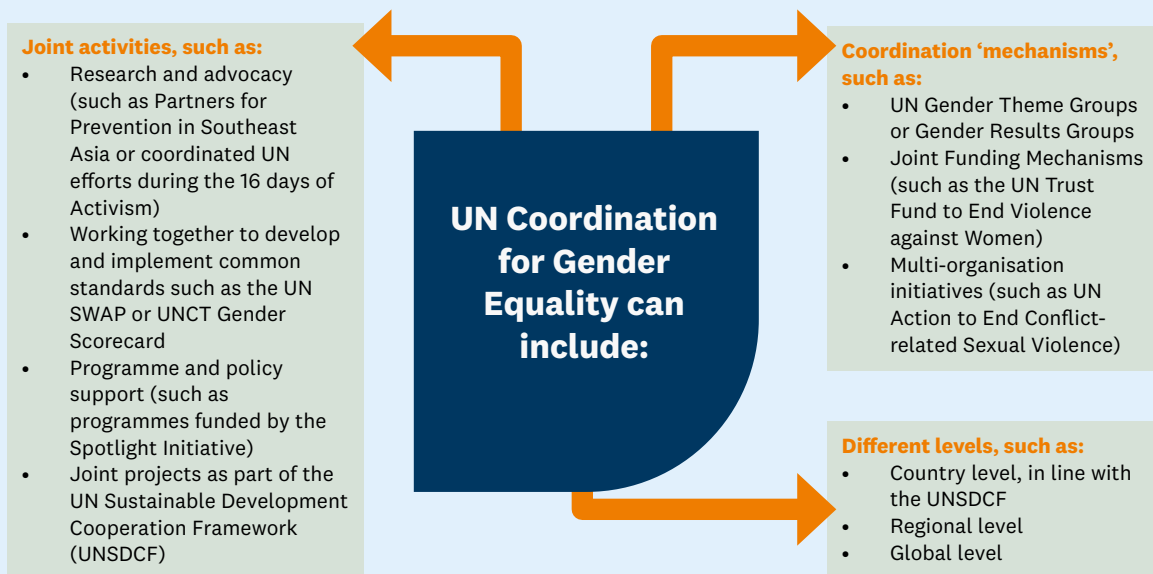
Goal Vision	Behaviour	Focus
Mutual & reciprocated	Open & complimentary	Ideas & creation
Limited or no mutuality	Avoiding conflict	Common benefit
Independent & self-serving	Directed by coordinator	Efficiency



Collective power/ impact

Equitable partnership where there is: a strong backbone organisation, shared agendas and measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, and constant communication

Figure 2. Coordination for gender equality



We hope to stimulate critical thinking and honest conversations about how the UN’s collective power and impact for gender equality could be enhanced. We have questions, not answers. We have stories, not evidence.

We are not advocating for more or better bureaucratic coordination for gender equality; we are advocating for re-thinking the collective power of the UN to support local, national, regional and global transformation towards gender equality in the face of rising authoritarianism, illiberal conservatism and patriarchal nationalism.

We raise this in the context of coordination because it is the term¹ the UN uses as a broad label for joint work between UN organisations and because the UN has received billions of dollars in special funds to encourage UN organisations to cooperate with one another more effectively over the past 20 years. It is a particularly important question at a time when the UN’s gender equality architecture² is under review.³ UN Women, with its three-part operational, normative and coordination mandates for gender equality, continues to be under-funded and under-staffed, despite the Secretary-General asserting that the challenges of this century can only be addressed by “an interconnected response” and has placed women and girls at the centre of that response [7].

In this paper we explore three ideas: (1) insights and lessons learned about the factors that support and impede the UN’s collective power on gender equality; (2) how feminist thinking about collaboration and collective power could enhance the UN’s approach to coordination; and (3) changing structures and incentives for supporting greater collective power and action on gender equality. We hope that this piece will encourage readers to reflect and discuss these ideas with colleagues both within and outside the UN and contribute to greater collective action on gender equality.

1 The term “coordination” across the UN system can mean different things. For the purposes of this paper, our definition is derived from a guidance note on the UN Resident Coordinator system (2016). Transposing this to coordination for gender equality, our definition anticipates “shared global, regional and country-level vision, norms and standards, capacities and operating protocols to deliver together more coherent, effective and efficient support to globally, regionally and nationally agreed goals and priorities. [It entails] leveraging the leadership, policy and practices, and diverse expertise across UN development entities, to work together ... [on] improving the relevance, effectiveness and impact of the UN’s contribution to [gender equality]”.

2 The term “gender-equality architecture” refers to the structural arrangements of teams, units, departments, advisors, specialists, and leaders mandated to advance and support work on gender equality across all UN agencies. Location, staffing, budgets, mandates and authority are all part of the architecture.

3 UN Gender Review Briefing Note, “Independent Review of the UN System’s Capacity to Deliver on Gender Equality”, 2022.



WHAT SUPPORTS AND WHAT IMPEDES THE COLLECTIVE POWER OF THE UN FOR GENDER EQUALITY?

Has the UN learned important lessons from decades of bold, well-financed coordination initiatives, including the small proportion of those focused on gender equality? Although there are disparate evaluations and assessments, such as the 2013 *Joint Evaluation of Joint Programmes on Gender Equality in the UN System*, we could not find a definitive aggregated study or evaluation that pulls together decades of investment and efforts to encourage coordination writ large, or specifically in relation to coordination for gender equality [8].⁴

Reflecting on our own experiences within the UN over 20 years, we estimate that well over USD 2 billion (probably much more) has been invested specifically to enhance coordinated action across the UN. For example, in 1997, entrepreneur/philanthropist and CNN-founder, Ted Turner, pledged USD 1 billion over 10 years for the UN to “become a partnership organization” [9]. The Spanish Government created the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) fund of USD 900 million in 2007 to foster UN partnerships and more than USD 500 million was given to the UN to support *Delivering as One* pilots in eight countries. All of these made some funding, albeit inadequate, available for joint UN projects on gender equality and women’s rights. Added to these were partnerships, actions and funds generated for joint initiatives on gender equality through a variety of inter-agency mechanisms, such as UNAIDS, the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, the Spotlight Initiative, and other special funds that support collaborative efforts across the UN [10, 11].

After all these efforts where are the studies that consolidate the evidence and aggregate the lessons learned about coordination for gender equality? Absence of analysis begs several questions: Is the cost of coordination far higher than the value of gains for gender equality? Are the various approaches, incentives, and kinds of leadership support among different UN organisations sufficiently compatible to allow for real collective action? Are there certain instances where the UN’s coordination for gender equality

⁴ A number of evaluations and think pieces address coordination of gender equality at both global and national levels, but we could not find a jointly undertaken meta evaluation that generated practical and strategic guidance. One of the most relevant we found was the 2013 *Joint Evaluation of Joint Programmes on Gender Equality in the UN System*.

One reviewer noted that “numerous conflicts, and crises – from Ukraine to Afghanistan, to food insecurity in the Sahel and Horn of Africa – are heavily gendered, and yet the gender dimensions are absolutely missing from analysis and response, and when presented are piecemeal. Who is coordinating or should be?”

Anonymous

across agencies can generate significant benefits, while, in others, action by individual UN agencies with a different set of partners is more effective and efficient? How can we know?

Gender inequality is a global scourge that can only be meaningfully addressed through collaborative effort [12]. Thus the argument for the UN to use its collective power to advance gender equality is compelling. Life-threatening events, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the climate crisis, all have gender dimensions [1, 13] that require collective and intersectional action across many boundaries, including organisational and sectoral ones. Rising threats of a backlash against gender equality, including the election of certain populist leaders who have explicitly called for a return to traditional and discriminatory gender roles [14], and highly influential efforts to roll back previous gains, as illustrated by the conservative US Supreme Court overturning of *Roe v Wade*, are reversing many hard-won freedoms [15]. A recent survey of 144 countries by *Equal Measures 2030* on progress towards gender-equality targets embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), found that “less than a quarter of countries are making “fast” progress towards gender equality, while a third are making no progress, or, worse still, are moving in the wrong direction”[16].

The wellbeing of women and girls cannot and should not be divided and diluted by dispersing responsibilities across the health mandate of WHO, the labour mandate of ILO, UNICEF’s focus on children, UNFPA’s focus on sexual and reproductive rights and health, and UN Women’s overall emphasis on gender equality. And yet, for decades, it has been. Why, when we interview staff from UN organisations about what works to advance gender equality, do coordination, cooperation or collaboration regularly fail to be identified as key ingredients? We posit three push factors and five impediments. Our observations are the result of our professional experiences together with a cursory review of disparate evaluations and case studies of coordination, in particular those related to gender equality issues.



WHAT ADVANCES COLLECTIVE AND COORDINATED EFFORTS ON GENDER EQUALITY IN THE UN?

Three ingredients appear to positively influence gender equality and create an enabling environment for coordinated action.

(1) A shared vision shaped by a significant range of stakeholders, including governments, civil society organisations (CSOs), women’s rights networks, private-sector partners, academic organisations and UN organisations. Numerous examples exist which include, the Beijing Platform for Action, Security Council Resolutions on women, peace and security, SDGs targets related to gender equality, and the roadmap recently developed through the Generation Equality Forum [17] which celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action. The shared vision embodied in UN norms and standards have enabled effective UN system-wide initiatives for gender equality, such as country-level and transnational inter-agency efforts to support the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Recommendations, often in partnership with feminist organisations and government partners. Of course, advocacy for the kinds of strategies and tactics prioritised by UN Country Teams (UNCTs) and Regional Directors is the point where contestation usually occurs. Too often – even where national partners are ready to take action – volunteers and junior-level gender equality advocates, say as part of a gender theme group, find it hard to convince UNCT decision-makers to allocate fund for gender-equality initiatives. Nonetheless, a common vision is a crucial enabling factor.

(2) Pooling non-financial UN resources to establish minimum performance standards on gender equality. A number of mechanisms within the UN have been used to pool gender equality expertise and experience, from the UN Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality at the global level to results groups on gender equality at country level. These have, at times, generated system-wide or UNCT-wide standards and agreements that have propelled action. In our interviews with UN staff on what works to mainstream gender equality in health programming the main “coordinated” initiatives mentioned were the UN System-Wide Action Plan (UN-SWAP) on gender equality and the Gender Equality Marker for budget tracking. As much as staff and partners criticise the low bar set by these initiatives (i.e. UN-SWAP sets

unambitious process-focused targets on allocations instead of measuring outcomes related to what was actually spent), and the inconsistency of data collection, these instruments were cited as having been effective to drive change. Gender advisors and advocates within the UN consider these instruments useful for pressuring leadership to make funds, training and tracking systems available for carrying out their work on gender equality.

(3) Dedicated resources for coordinated action on gender equality

catalyse action on every issue in the UN, including gender equality. The joint programmes on ending female genital mutilation and child marriage, cited as successful examples in the UNU-IIGH study, were funded by dedicated budgets for partnerships. There is a great deal to be learned from examples such as the USD 9 million UN inter-agency initiative, which was made possible by the USD 900 million MDG fund. In 2009 eight UN organisations joined together in Morocco to coordinate a programme to protect women and girls from all forms of violence (and to try to prevent it) by addressing the inter-linkages of poverty and vulnerability [18] (see Box 1). As part of the 3-year programme, partnerships were ultimately developed with some 13 national entities and 50 CSOs.

BOX 1

The Tamkine [empowerment] multi-sector programme for addressing gender-based violence (GBV) through the empowerment of women and girls in Morocco, undertaken from 2009 to 2012 by eight UN organisations, with resources from the Spanish MDG Fund, established important and lasting precedents for addressing GBV in the country. The programme operated at national, regional and local levels to provide support to advocacy for reforming the legal framework, resulting in amendments to the penal code and code of penal procedures for the protection of women and girls, as well as a proposed law dealing specifically with GBV, and a proposed law to protect domestic workers, which were later approved. The national database was upgraded to include a national violence survey, enabling the monitoring and evaluation of GBV policies and programmes. National capacities, including those of elected officials and NGOs in gender-responsive budgeting were enhanced. Local communities in the targeted regions developed gender-responsive community development plans that addressed GBV and women's human rights. Referral mechanisms created at the local level continue today, and the coordination mechanisms and governance structures continue to foster cooperation among the Ministry of Justice, police, and others on GBV issues. The number of counselling centres grew from 38 in 2008 to 52 in 2010, with the number of women able to access services doubling in some shelters. The shelters and their integrated services – legal, psychological, social, and economic – raised awareness on women's rights and GBV in the community.

In addition, there will be more to learn from the outcomes of the EUR 500 million Spotlight Initiative on ending violence against women and girls. Funded by the European Union, it is perhaps one of the largest donations to support a coherent UN response on a life-and-death gender equality issue. While an independent assessment of the outcome of the Spotlight Initiative is not yet publicly available, progress reports highlight important results for ending violence against women, as well as for system-wide coordination [19]. Aside from donor funding, an important question is why the UN fails to allocate a greater percentage of its core resources to gender equality, rather than (often) making action contingent on raising separate funds.



WHAT IMPEDES COLLECTIVE AND COORDINATED EFFORTS ON GENDER EQUALITY IN THE UN?

Undeniably, coordination with respect to gender equality has improved significantly, from the rapid response on the gender dimensions of COVID-19 to collective commitments on advancing gender parity in leadership. Investments in UN inter-agency mechanisms at the country, regional and global levels have increased. Nevertheless, entrenched colonial legacies and patriarchal structures of hierarchical organisations like the UN are at odds with the notions of justice and equity that underpin gender equality and feminist approaches.

Is the UN really a system? “While we refer to it as the UN system, far too much of it has been colonised by rich countries and the corporate sector, and this is as much a problem as patriarchal cultures”.

David McCoy, Research Lead, UNU-IIGH

Over the course of many conversations with UN staff, five particular challenges were frequently cited as impediments to collective impact on gender equality.

(1) The pay-to-play approach. Competition for funds fuels a great deal of the action, but also leads to tensions between UN organisations. Too often this approach discourages collaboration as agencies jockey to prove their value to donors. This then determines who becomes the gatekeeper for priorities and which organisation gets to lead initiatives for gender equality. The extent to which a UN organisation is placed “in the lead” has more to do with organisational budgets, administrative capacity, or other political considerations than substantive experience or expertise. Large UN organisations and specific teams (those working on issues that attract robust funding) with more resources and greater power are deemed the leaders, while smaller organisations or teams (such as the gender equality teams) that advocate for those most excluded are relegated to “implementing partner” status or bypassed completely.

Donors often perpetuate this dynamic by sending mixed messages. Calls for greater coordination on executive boards (or, say, during the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review) can contradict contribution strategies, which often prioritise individual UN agency action rather than funding those most effective at supporting collaboration. For example, the Spotlight Initiative initially bypassed UN Women and the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (an inter-agency trust fund housed at UN Women). This fund has more than 20 years of experience in making grants, including to UNCTs at one point, to end violence against women and girls. Instead, funding for the Spotlight Initiative was directed at generating new infrastructure and setting up a new secretariat. While UN Women and other agencies ultimately played key roles in implementing the fund at country level, the EU and UN, in creating new structures at significant expense, sent a strong message about their preferences for new coordination mechanisms rather than strengthening the existing UN organisation already dedicated to gender equality and ending GBV, and allowing it to play the coordination role central to its mandate.

Inequities in funding create significant asymmetries in power, authority and voice at decision-making tables. For gender equality work more broadly, the constant competition for funds also creates tensions between women’s organisations, government partners and others, further complicating joint initiatives. Coordinated and collective action requires equitable partnerships based on mutual respect, which runs counter to a pay-to-play mentality.

(2) Size and status matter more than expertise. What determines whether UN organisations are invited into initiatives to assure coordinated action on the gender equality dimensions of key issues? In one of many examples, from 2003 to 2011 UNIFEM tried repeatedly to become a member of UNAIDS yet was systematically rejected from formal membership, allegedly because its budget was inadequate, even though the AIDS pandemic was widely recognised as a gender issue.

Today, UN Women remains outside the membership of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) [20] despite a recent system-wide evaluation on gender in emergencies [21]. This report called for leadership and coordination on gender equality, together with the inclusion of UN Women, especially given the observed levels of sexual abuse and exploitation in emergency relief responses and the ongoing necessity to extend protection from sexual exploitation and abuse to women and girls throughout the UN system.

“Many now talk about the nexus of humanitarian and development [issues]. Gender equality is the thread between the two and we do not emphasise that enough.”

Alice Shackelford, UN Resident Coordinator

Many gender equality advocates, including UN Women, question, from a gender perspective, what constitutes “humanitarian action” and why women and girls are denied equal rights and protection when the criterion is to support only “life-saving” and emergency action. Many humanitarian actors refuse to see the life-saving nature of work on gender equality, despite examples such as in Afghanistan, where neglect of women and girls is literally threatening lives.

UN Women and gender advisors are left to lobby for admittance as they attempt to convince the Secretary-General to intervene on their behalf. Either that, or they must mobilise outside the UN system to put political pressure on the guardians of the rules for the IASC. The exclusion of gender equality expertise – whether UN Women or gender advisory teams – on the basis of pre-set, technocratic criteria, rather than making use of

their technical expertise and links to local and national networks, runs counter to effective collective action.⁵

(3) Follow the leader. Patriarchy depends on a single story where leaders get to define reality and everyone else falls in line. When the 2006 Delivering as One panel report was issued, it built on the concept of the “Four Ones”: one programme, one leader, one budgetary framework, and one office. The notion of oneness – the single leader, the single answer – runs counter to so much of what we have learned from feminist action, where a high value is placed on notions like shared leadership, consensus, the generative nature of healthy debate, and collective action. The notion of “the one” prioritises authority and singularity rather than the kinds of consultative approaches and respect for diversity that gender equality promotes and requires. It suggests upward accountability (e.g. “lower-level” staff report “up”) rather than the kinds of interdependence and interconnectedness between individuals, organisations and functions that propel change. Having more feminist Resident Coordinators could be a game changer when it comes to re-framing leadership and collective action.

(4) The high cost of coordination. Can the same or better results for gender equality be achieved through supporting far-reaching partnerships, instead of restricting inter-agency initiatives to UN organisations? We found no analysis that answers this question. What we know, however, is the cost of coordination in terms of money, time and human energy is enormous. Different UN organisations use different accounting systems, have different rules, and the range of organisational cultures is diverse. Negotiating these tensions causes delays, conflict and miscommunications [22].

In this regard, a disproportionate burden for coordination for gender equality falls on UN Women, which remains the most poorly funded of all operational UN organisations. Designated coordination for gender equality is one of UN Women’s three key mandates, but are Member States investing adequately in its capacity to reframe, build buy-in and capacity, and perform that function? Not only does UN Women require far more resources and staff to clarify and support strategic partnerships and collaboration for gender equality, so too do gender teams and gender advisors in other UN organisations, including OCHA and UNAIDS, which are mandated to coordinate in related thematic areas.

⁵ There is ample debate about the constraining and gender-discriminatory nature of using “life-saving” as a criterion for humanitarian relief. The average length of crises is now about 17 years and the nature of emergencies has vastly changed since definitions were agreed many decades ago. Continuing to rely on criteria that demand that humanitarian actions are restricted to those that are life-saving, and fears that the neutrality of humanitarian agencies will be questioned if funds go to organisations with specific human rights commitments will limit the relevance of emergency relief to the concrete (and often life-threatening) consequences faced by women and girls. (UN Women staff member, 1 May 2022)

A key informant in the mid-term assessment of the Spotlight Initiative in Liberia [22]. commented that “the EU insists that as a UN reform, all operational things should be done joint. If there are ten laptops under UNDP, five laptops under UNICEF, one under UN Women, they should all be procured under one UN procurement approach. ... [T]hat is a challenge, but we are trying. ... It has just been one and a half years. ... I have to say there has been a huge difference when the team started with a lot of opposition, with a lot of hesitation and a lot of fear to what it does now. But we still have to convince many of them to come together, sit together, discuss and even share costs.”

(5) The UN as a members-only club. The agenda for gender equality does not primarily emanate from UN resolutions, UN leaders or Member States. Rather, statements from UN leaders, resolutions, and laws enacted by Member States are, ultimately, responses to grassroots action and advocacy led by feminists and women’s groups in countries and communities around the world.

When a large-scale coordinated action for gender equality is being developed by UN partners, UN organisations with no expertise in gender equality get a seat at decision-making tables. Meanwhile, partners who deeply understand the work – local and national leaders for gender equality – are considered mere “implementers”. The intense focus of coordination on engaging numerous UN organisations is not consistent with how change for gender equality actually occurs. There is increasing evidence that the most influential determinant of a country’s progress – changing laws and policies in relation to GBV – is the existence of robust, autonomous feminist movements [23]. What is required for the UN to broaden and expand its notion of collective action for gender equality to meaningfully include feminist CSOs? What would it take to develop a more effective and inclusive approach, generate support for collective action by autonomous women’s rights groups and networks, and create seats for CSO stakeholders and give them a voice as equal partners, particularly at country level?



ALIGNING WITH FEMINIST PRINCIPLES TO ENHANCE THE COLLECTIVE IMPACT OF THE UN FOR GENDER EQUALITY

What if coordination for gender equality in the UN involved a change of mindset, language, and incentives aligned with feminist principles and lessons, taking into account how intersectional feminist and social justice networks are deepening and broadening our notions of inclusivity and cross-pollination? What if, instead of coordination, we pursued pathways to gender equality based on collective power and collective impact [24], and focused on those areas where collective action has unique value and where outcomes matter more than the performative aspects of coordination? And, finally, what if our notions of the collective included those actors outside of the UN at country, regional and global levels who are actually leading for gender equality? UN coordination for gender equality could benefit enormously from feminist thinking and action.

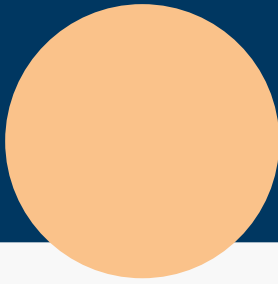
Collective power is defined by Srilatha Batliwala [25] as the power to confront and challenge injustice by finding, mobilising and joining hands with others who care about the same cause. Batliwala points out that *power with* is actually the most potent expression of power and has successfully ended some of the world's greatest injustices. Much of the discussion on coordination involves *power over* (i.e. the power of certain UN leaders to manage relationships with governments, distribute financial resources, and act as arbiter). While coordination hints at it, the UN could place greater emphasis on the power of the collective (*power with*) and a common purpose (*power to*) to create better outcomes for all.

The literature on collective impact contends that large-scale social change comes from better cross-sector coordination rather than from the isolated interventions of individual organisations. UN organisations are positioned – as organisations existing under a common umbrella – to actualise the vision of collective impact. Many of the elements noted above are already in place, including:

- **A common agenda**, shaped by collectively defining the problem and creating a shared vision to solve it. The SDGs, CEDAW, SCR1325, and many other normative agreements at global and regional levels

underpin this collective shared vision. They do not have to be re-envisioned or re-negotiated.

- **Shared measurement systems**, based on an agreement among all participants to track and share progress in the same way, allowing for continuous learning, improvement, and accountability. The SDG framework provides elements of a shared measurement system, although all of these need to be grounded and agreed in the context of country-level capacities and realities to make a difference in people's lives.
- **Mutually reinforcing activities**, integrating participants' many different activities to maximize outcomes. In this instance, the country-based UNSDCF outlines what these would be across the UN system as a starting point. Nevertheless, many dynamics exist in the pay-to-play system, where size matters more than expertise, especially when determining which activities are included and budgeted.
- **Continuous communication**, which helps to build trust and forge new relationships. There are numerous mechanisms established to support this from heads-of-agency meetings to thematic groups on gender equality and other channels. Whether they are used to share information strategically, equitably and with purpose requires greater consideration.
- **A strong support organisation serving as a backbone, dedicated to aligning and motivating work on gender.** UN Women is the designated backbone organisation across the UN. Although it lacks robust and dependable resources, and associated staffing and structures, it is still a skilled and easily accessible organisation and supports a diverse range of initiatives on gender equality across the UN system. Strengthening this backbone would see UN Women and the web of advisors and teams for gender equality across the various UN agencies with sufficient resources to reward, communicate, elevate, amplify, advocate and incentivise strong collective action, as well as the ability to give credit to the groups of people who have fully committed to the power of the collective.



COLLECTIVE IMPACT FOR GENDER EQUALITY: DARE TO BE DARING

We started this article with two questions: (1) how do we assess whether the benefits and results of UN coordination for gender equality are commensurate with the amount of time, energy and funds invested? And (2) how might a shift in mindset – taking into account feminist notions of collective power – transform the way the UN thinks, acts and invests in what we currently call coordination? Following conversations with colleagues on the subject of the UN using its collective power for gender equality, our readings of evaluations and case studies on coordination, and thinking about our own decades of experience working on gender equality in the UN, we propose five ideas for centering and strengthening collective action on gender equality:

(1) Reframe notions of top-down coordination. Collective power and action require a more horizontal and synergistic approach. Progress towards gender equality can then be reframed in terms of the organisation’s collective impact and tracked according to commonly agreed metrics and feminist principles. More consistently, UN staff designated as leads for gender equality who have the knowledge, experience and networks to add value, also need substantive skills and a toolbox for facilitating collective action. More incisive analysis of what works and what does not across coordination initiatives is needed. Regular analyses of existing mechanisms that enhance collaboration, such as the regional analysis of gender-theme groups and results group on gender in the Europe and Central Asia region, are required [26]. Systematic assessments of the kinds of situations that demand collective action, as well as those organisations and individuals which are critical for advancing these, could reduce the amount of wasted resources that the UN spends on “coordinating” itself.

(2) Re-think notions of inclusion with respect to leaving no one behind in the composition of inter-agency groups or other mechanisms for collective action. Too often, coordination initiatives direct a disproportionate amount of energy and resources to UN organisations rather than to the national and local partners they are meant to benefit. Greater inclusion of women’s and feminist networks of all types, together with a focus on the kind of care and

trust-building strategies that feminist networks are pioneering, could assist UN organisations to incorporate different practices into their collective action. Creating equitable partnerships with feminist and women’s rights groups, with seats for them at UN coordination tables (this currently happens occasionally but not enough) and resources for them in UN budgets, would ground UN efforts in national, regional and global realities, and tighten accountability. Rather than spending countless hours and resources figuring out coordination mechanisms between UN organisations, ensure that programmes are laser focused on the people who are the major drivers and actors.

(3) Re-prioritise what aspects of the UN’s work on gender equality require a collective approach. Coordination is a means, not an end, and the cost of coordination is high. UN organisations’ willingness to engage in collective action with one another and with partners requires an open and collaborative space; this takes time and facilitation. A more specific set of criteria is needed to help assess when comprehensive UN coordination is required and when a more horizontal, light-touch collective action is sufficient, or whether resources simply need to be assigned to those with the greatest expertise to “just do it!” An independent assessment could explore the range of projects that have, collectively, spent hundreds of millions of dollars on coordination for gender equality. Such a study would extract valuable lessons and provide an evidence base on what aspects of the UN’s work generated positive results through coordination and which actions were actually more effective and efficient when undertaken by other types of collective efforts.

(4) Resource the UN’s backbone for gender equality to build a world class gender architecture. UN Women needs to be fortified, as does the network of gender teams, advisors and specialists across all the UN agencies so they can play the critical role they are mandated to play within and across their organisations [27].⁶ Initiating change requires sufficient resources to leverage power and mobilise colleagues across the system, driving respect for work on gender equality.

At this moment, the UN is reviewing its gender architecture.⁷ This represents an opportunity to examine how re-framing coordination and focusing on collective power and impact, rather than top-down authority, might be a game changer. Now is the time to call for the kinds of organisational arrangements that would facilitate robust feminist leadership, and for the galvanising of insider–outsider strategies. We should

⁶ According to a review undertaken in preparation for Beijing +25 in 2020–21, only 2.03 per cent of the UN Development System expenditures are allocated to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, while 2.6 per cent of UN personnel work on the issue.

⁷ UN Gender Review Briefing Note, “Independent Review of the UN System’s Capacity to Deliver on Gender Equality”, 2022.

be unapologetic in specifying the robust financing that such a complex undertaking as collective action for gender equality requires. An evaluation of UN Women’s coordination role in addressing GBV noted that “a coordination mandate is a necessary but insufficient condition for ensuring effective coordination to mainstream gender perspectives in development results. Implementing the mandate requires appropriate investment to strengthen the legitimacy vested in the coordinating entity to ‘lead, promote and coordinate’ the UN system” [28]. Such collective action cannot succeed without a strong backbone.

(5) Re-negotiate ideas about accountability. The study *Partnering for Parity: Strengthening Collaborations for Gender Equality* [29] noted that many collaborations fail because of a diffusion of accountability. The UN often demands accountability from those who support gender-equality initiatives (e.g. gender advisors, gender-theme groups, and gender-equality teams) rather than holding higher-ranked management, who have the greatest power, accountable for failing to dedicate adequate human and financial resources to programmes. Managers need to use their full power and privilege to invest in and prioritise gender equality initiatives and gender mainstreaming.

Practices like assigning responsibility for gender equality to very junior gender focal points and sending only interns and junior staff to meetings of inter-agency thematic groups on gender represent a misplaced sense of accountability. Gender equality tasks are often assigned as additional – but invisible and unrewarded – work to staff willing and interested, but who have other jobs. We take such practices as examples of shirking responsibilities and deflecting accountability.

In addition, while UN organisations report to governments through a variety of mechanisms at country, regional and global levels, there is no mechanism for organisational accountability to feminist movements and networks, which have spent inestimable amounts of energy in their efforts to advance gender equality.



CONCLUSION

Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld once counselled: “The UN was created not to lead mankind to heaven but to save humanity from hell” [30]. The institution is built on unequal power: rich nations have disproportionate influence and individuals and organisations with greater power and money are often able to err with impunity, while those with less pay a high price. The Security Council, for example, is an apex UN body that has more power than all others. At the same time, the UN is the space where norms like Leave No One Behind and countless visionary UN Conventions and Resolutions are agreed. Millions of people worldwide have benefited from the human rights commitments, policies and services that emerge from negotiated UN agreements. Staff and partners of the UN work uncomfortably between these two poles and must manage accordingly. While many hierarchical practices that comprise life-as-normal in the UN will not change, there are spheres of action and influence that can help to re-shape coordination into meaningful collective action and impact with respect to gender equality.

There are many examples of the UN using its collective power to advance gender equality, whether in collective advocacy to end GBV to shining a light on the profound gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the UN’s approach to coordination for gender equality and the principles and practices that underpin feminist collective action for change are often diametrically opposed. It is past time to consolidate evidence from years of experience, include women’s rights and feminist organisations in collective action, and undertake a cost-benefit analysis from a gender and outcome-based perspective. What kinds of initiatives clearly require collective strategies for gender equality and which initiatives or contexts should avoid the quagmire of time and resources dedicated to “coordination” processes?

This is a unique opportunity to reframe, re-think, resource, re-prioritise, and re-negotiate past practices, align with feminist principles that highlight collective action and power, and significantly strengthen the resources and voices of leaders for gender equality within and outside the UN.

Acknowledgements

The authors express deep appreciation to Funmi Balogun, Florence Basty-Hamimi, Jennifer Cooper, Maria Jose Alcala Donegani, Sarah Douglas, Anne Marie Goetz, David McCoy, April Pham, Alice Shackelford and Sagri Singh for their feedback on different versions of this article. Thanks to Johanna Riha of UNU-IIGH for her valuable insights, patience and guidance throughout.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] United Nations. (2020). Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women. *United Nations*. <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/report/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en-1.pdf>
- [2] UN Women. (2020). Inter-Agency statement on violence against women and girls in the context of COVID-19. *UN Women* <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/Inter-AgencyStatementVAW-and-COVID-19.pdf>.
- [3] UNAIDS. (2020). We've got the power - Women, adolescent girls, and the HIV response. *UNAIDS*. https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2020/2020_women-adolescent-girls-and-hiv
- [4] Riha, J., Ravindran, S., Atiim, G., Remme, M. & Khanna, R. (2021). What works in gender and health in the United Nations: Lessons learned from cases of successful mainstreaming across five UN Agencies. *Gender & Health Hub*. <https://www.genderhealthhub.org/articles/what-works-in-gender-and-health-in-the-united-nations-lessons-learned-from-cases-of-successful-gender-mainstreaming-across-five-un-agencies/>
- [5] United Nations Sustainable Development Group. (2020). United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework: Internal guidance. *United Nations Sustainable Development Group*. <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/UN%20Cooperation%20Framework%20Internal%20Guidance%20--%201%20June%202022.pdf>
- [6] MEP Services. (2018). The 4Cs of Design Build: Cooperate, Collaborate, Coordinate, Communicate. *EQUANS*. <https://www.equansmep.com/news/the-4cs-of-design-build-cooperate-collaborate-coordinate-communicate/#:~:text=The%204Cs%20of%20Design%20Build,%2C%20Coordinate%2C%20Communicate%20%E2%80%93%20MEP%20Services>
- [7] United Nations. (2021). Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General. *United Nations*. https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf
- [8] UN Women, UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA & the MDG Fund. (2013). Joint Evaluation of Joint Programmes on gender equality in the UN System. *UN Women* <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/admin-resource/JGP%20Evaluation%20Synthesis%20Report.pdf>.
- [9] United Nations. (2006). Ted Turner's United Nations Foundation delivers \$1 billion to UN causes. *United Nations*. <https://press.un.org/en/2006/dev2594.doc.htm>
- [10] UN Women. (2022). The Spotlight Initiative: Ending violence against women and girls. *UN Women*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/spotlight-initiative>
- [11] UN Women. (2022). UN Trust Fund to end violence against women. *UN Women*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/trust-funds/un-trust-fund-to-end-violence-against-women>.
- [12] Bahous, S. (2022). Opening remarks by Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN Women, Sima Bahous, at the first regular session of the UN Women Executive Board: Firm resolve, strategic focus and solidarity. *UN Women*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2022/02/opening-remarks-by-under-secretary-general-of-the-united-nations-and-executive-director-of-un-women-sima-bahous-at-the-first-regular-session-of-the-un-women-executive-board>

- [13] United Nations Environment Programme, UN Women, UNDP and UNDP/PA/PBSO. (2020). Gender, climate and security: Sustaining inclusive peace on the frontlines of climate change. *UN Women*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/gender-climate-and-security>
- [14] Goetz, A. M. (2020). The New Competition in Multilateral Norm-Setting: Transnational Feminists & the Illiberal Backlash. *American Academy of Arts & Sciences*. 149: 160–179. https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_01780
- [15] Gay, M. (2022). The Republican War on Sex. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/02/opinion/abortion-ban-sex.html>
- [16] Equal Measures 2030. (2022). SDG Gender Index: Back to normal is not enough. *Equal Measures 2030*. <https://www.equalmeasures2030.org/2022-sdg-gender-index/>
- [17] Generation Equality Forum. (2021). Accelerating Progress for Gender Equality. *The Generation Equality Forum*. <https://forum.generationequality.org/home>
- [18] MDG Achievement Fund. (2009). Programme for the fight against gender-based violence through the empowerment of women and girls in Morocco. *MDG Achievement Fund*. <http://www.mdgfund.org/node/681>
- [19] Spotlight Initiative. (2021). Rising to the challenge impact report (2020-2021). *United Nations Sustainable Development Group*. <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/rising-challenge-impact-report-2020-2021>
- [20] Inter-Agency Standing Committee. (2022). IASC Membership. *OCHA Services*. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-about/iasc-membership>
- [21] Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group. (2020). The Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls (GEEWG). *Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group*. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/resource/the-inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-iahe-on-gender-equality-and-the-empowerment-of-women-and-girls-geewg/>
- [22] Hera. (2021). Spotlight Mid-Term Assessment Report using ROM Review: Spotlight review in Liberia. *Hera*. <https://www.hera.eu/en/news/the-spotlight-on-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls/>
- [23] Htun, M. & Weldon, S.L. (2014). Progressive policy change on women’s economic and social rights. *UN Women*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/progress-of-the-worlds-women>
- [24] Kania, J., Williams, J., Schmitz, P., Brady, S., Kramer, M & Splansky Juster, J. (2022). Centering equity in collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/centering_equity_in_collective_impact
- [25] Batliwala, S. (2019). All about power: Understanding social power and power structures. *CREA*. <https://creaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/All-About-Power.pdf>
- [26] United Nations Development Group Europe and Central Asia. (2016). A regional analysis of Gender-Theme Groups and Results Groups on gender in Europe and Central Asia. *United Nations Development Group*. https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/ECA-IBC-Gender_GTG-Analysis_August-2016_260218.pdf
- [27] United Nations Interagency Network on Women and Gender Equality. (2020). 25 Years after Beijing: A review of the UN system’s support for the implementation of the Platform for Action, 2014–2019. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/09/ianwge-review-of-un-system-support-for-implementation-of-platform-for-action>
- [28] UN Women. (2021). Corporate evaluation of UN Women’s UN System Coordination and Broader Convening Role in ending violence against women. *UN Women*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/06/evaluation-un-women-un-system-coordination-and-broader-convening-role-in-evaw>
- [29] McKinsey & Company. (2017). Partnering for parity: Strengthening collaborations for gender equality. *McKinsey & Company*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/partnering-for-parity>
- [30] United Nations. (1954). Address by Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld at University of California Convocation. *United Nations Digital Library*. <https://digitalibrary.un.org/record/1291161?ln=en>