



ODUMUNC 2025 Issue Brief
The Economic Community of West African States
(ECOSOC)



Invest in Women: UN Gender Strategy

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Introduction

The United Nations is working to make the world a fairer place, especially for women and girls. One of the main ways they are doing this is through the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which focuses on improving global social and economic issues. A big part of their work is the “Invest in Women” strategy. This strategy acknowledges that the empowerment of

women and girls benefits society as a whole. The UN believes that investing in women’s rights and opportunities is key to improving everything from education to economic growth.^{1,2,3}

The UN says that when women are given equal access to education, jobs, and leadership roles, entire communities and economies grow stronger. Women tend to invest more of their

¹ United Nations n.d., “Achieving Gender Equality, Women’s Empowerment and Strengthening Development Cooperation | Economic and Social Council,” United Nations, n.d., <https://ecosoc.un.org/en/documents/publications/achieving-gender-equality-womens-empowerment-and-strengthening-development>.

² United Nations, “SDG Indicators,” United Nations, n.d., <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/>.

³ UN Women n.d., “The Future Is Equality Feminist Empowerment Autonomy Rights,” UN Women – Headquarters, n.d., <https://www.unwomen.org/en/annual-report/2024>.



income into their families and communities, leading to better health, education, and overall well-being. But to make this happen, there are still challenges to overcome, like laws and systems that hold women back from opportunities.⁴⁵

The UN's gender strategy has a special focus on *Goal 5* of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, also known as the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs). Goal 5, one of seventeen SDGs, all about achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. This means fighting for equal pay, better healthcare, more opportunities for leadership, and an end to violence against women. ECOSOC believes that countries must make policies that support women and ensure they have the same rights and opportunities as men.⁶⁷

The UN has passed many important resolutions and reports to push for these changes. These documents call for laws that protect women, investments in education, and more financial support for women-owned businesses. The goal is a world where women can lead, create, and thrive just like anyone else.⁸

While there is strong support for gender equality

among many UN Member States, support is not universal or limitless. Many Member States, led by Russia, are strongly opposed to any resolution that specifically emphasizes the right of women. In a major vote in the UN Security Council, China, Indonesia, South Africa and Vietnam joined Russia. They criticize feminist initiatives as an attack on traditional national or religious values. They demand that each sovereign Member States be left to resolve such matters exclusively through their domestic institutions and political processes, free of international pressure.⁹

Key Elements of the UN Gender Strategy

- **Education and Skills Development:** Promoting access to education for girls and women to equip them with the tools needed to succeed in the global economy.^{10,11}
- **Economic Empowerment:** Ensuring women have equal opportunities in the workforce, including equal pay for equal work, access to leadership positions, and financial independence.¹²

⁴ UN Women n.d., "Women's Economic Empowerment Strategy," UN Women – Headquarters, 2024, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/03/womens-economic-empowerment-strategy>.

⁵ Priyanka Varma 2024, "Why Investing in Women Benefits Us All," Harvard Kennedy School, May 6, 2024, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/cid/voices/why-investing-women-benefits-us-all>.

⁶ The Global Goals n.d., "Goal 5: Gender Equality," The Global Goals, n.d., <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/5-gender-equality/>.

⁷ UN Women n.d., "Commission on the Status of Women," UN Women – Headquarters, n.d., <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/commission-on-the-status-of-women>.

⁸ United Nations, "Resolutions on Gender Inequality, Role of Digital Technologies among Texts Adopted as Economic and Social Council Commences Its Management Session | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases," United Nations, June 8, 2021, <https://press.un.org/en/2021/ecosoc7050.doc.htm>.

⁹ Liz Ford, 'Russia (joined by China, South Africa, Vietnam and Indonesia) loses UN vote over women's rights in conflict zones', *Guardian*, 30 October 2020,

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/30/russia-loses-un-vote-over-womens-rights-in-conflict-zones>

¹⁰ UNESCO n.d., "Gender and Education for All - the Leap to Equality," UNESCO.org, n.d.,

<https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/gender-education-all>.

¹¹ GCED Clearinghouse n.d., "From Access to Empowerment: UNESCO Strategy for Gender Equality in and through Education 2019-2025," GCED Clearinghouse, n.d., <https://www.gcedclearinghouse.org/resources/access-empowerment-unesco-strategy-gender-equality-and-through-education-2019-2025>.

¹² UN WOMEN 2024, Women's Economic Empowerment Strategy, January 2024,

<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/un-women-womens-economic-empowerment-strategy-en.pdf>.



- **Gender-Based Violence Prevention:** Advocating for legal frameworks and policies to protect women from all forms of violence, including domestic abuse and human trafficking.¹³
- **Health and Well-being:** Addressing gender-specific health challenges and ensuring that women have access to reproductive healthcare and mental health support.¹⁴
- **Political Participation:** Promoting women's active participation in political processes and decision-making, aiming for gender parity in leadership roles.¹⁵

Major United Nations Reports and Resolutions

- **Achieving Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Strengthening Development Cooperation Dialogues at ECOSOC:** A publication by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.¹⁶
- **ECOSOC Resolution 2011/6:** Mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programs in the United Nations system.¹⁷
- **United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), (2024):** Resolution on Gender Equality and Women's

Empowerment.
ECOSOC/RES/2024/24.¹⁸

- **Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2024:** A report by UN Women and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.¹⁹

News Analyses

'Invest in Women: UNCDF's Gender Strategy 2022-2025', UN Capital Development Fund, 7 March 2024

<https://www.uncdf.org/article/8681/invest-in-women-a-look-at-uncdfs-gender-strategy>

"Invest in Women" is more than the theme of this year's International Women's Day (IWD). It's a call to action that is critical to the achievement of any and every development agenda in existence today—from the Sustainable Development Goals to the Doha Programme of Action, from the Addis Ababa Action Agenda to the Paris Agreement.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ UN Women n.d., "SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being," UN Women – Headquarters, n.d., <https://www.unwomen.org/en/resources/gender-snapshot/sdg-3>.

¹⁵ UNDP n.d., "Women's Political Participation," UNDP, n.d., <https://www.undp.org/governance/womens-political-participation>.

¹⁶ United Nations n.d., 10-50143 (E) (DESA) dialogues ECOSOC achieving gender equality women empowerment | PDF, n.d., <https://www.scribd.com/doc/149600870/10-50143-e-Desa-Dialogues-Ecosoc-Achieving-Gender-Equality-Women-Empowerment>.

¹⁷ UN Women n.d., "Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective into All Policies and Programmes in the United Nations System (ECOSOC Resolution 2011/6)," UN Women –

Headquarters, n.d.,

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/docs/2011/7/ecosoc-resolution-2011-6>.

¹⁸ United Nations 2021, "Resolutions on Gender Inequality, Role of Digital Technologies among Texts Adopted as Economic and Social Council Commences Its Management Session | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases," United Nations, June 8, 2021,

<https://press.un.org/en/2021/ecosoc7050.doc.htm>.

¹⁹ UN Women 2024, "Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2024," UN Women – Headquarters, 2024,

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/09/progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2024>.



What “Investing in Women” means in a practical sense involves capabilities around deploying gender-lensed investment tools in real economies to advance women’s economic empowerment, notably in the world’s most challenging geographies.

With a unique investment mandate and primary focus on the world’s 45 least developed countries, UNCDF supports precisely the kind of development finance that unlocks the development potential that women can provide in the economies they operate in and the sustainable development agenda as a whole.

Last year, UNCDF unveiled its Gender Equality Strategy 2022-2025, which was intended to provide a transformative approach to promoting women’s economic empowerment and gender equality.

On the occasion of International Women’s Day 2024 and this year’s theme—“Invest in Women”—UNCDF presents a few of the tenets of its Gender Equality Strategy.



Investing in women-led and -owned SMEs and gender-responsive enterprises

A major priority for UNCDF is providing support to women-led and -owned SMEs through direct financing as well as technical and corporate capacity building. One of the major components for catalysing innovative gender-responsive investments for these SMEs is unlocking additional local public and private financing. Such investments will focus on women-led enterprises and gender-sensitive businesses large enough to have a transformative impact on the livelihoods of local women.

Additionally, as part of creating a conducive environment to increase investments for women-led and -owned businesses, technical support will be provided to government and financial institutions to establish gender-friendly policy and regulatory environment. UNCDF will continue to support central banks, local commercial banks and the private sector to enable the availability of women-friendly financial products along with rigorous technical support designed for women-led and -owned SMEs.



Promoting innovative financing mechanisms for women’s economic empowerment

UNCDF will continue to deploy scalable and innovative financing models to build women’s resilience and promote economic livelihoods. This will include partnership building with local

partners, including governments, local banks, Fintech companies, women's groups, and the private sector.

UNCDF will create new funds, financing mechanisms and investment vehicles, while continuing to build and replenish local funds dedicated to supporting women-led and -owned SMEs alongside responsive economic development. This will be further expanded as a self-sustaining model by using local resources to attract additional capital in support of women's economic empowerment. The locally based model will allow last-mile women-led and -owned businesses to easily access required technical assistance as well as needed capital to grow their businesses.

Building on the experience and the support of partner governments, UNCDF will continue to support central banks and local commercial banks in the programme countries to establish structures and systems to provide regular financial and technical support to women-led and -owned SMEs.



Advancing gender equality through investments in inclusive cities

UNCDF through its IncluCity programme provides a comprehensive approach to city planners through technical assistance, capacity building, new tools and direct financing to address growing urban inequalities and economic exclusions. The program contributes to the commitments under SDGs 1, 5, 9, 10 and

11, with a particular focus on alleviating poverty among the most vulnerable populations. By providing capacity development and financing solutions, the IncluCity programme empowers cities to develop gender responsive and inclusive services, infrastructure, and economic opportunities in urban areas.

In partnership with female business leaders, UNCDF in partnership with UN-HABITAT and ellaImpacta launched the Women-led Cities initiative; a unique collaborative effort with city governments, notably female mayors, to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs and address gender inequality in urban centres. The long-term objective is to transform both urban centres where there is a high percentage of people living in underdeveloped areas, as well as informal settlements with low productivity and greater poverty.

Looking to the future, UNCDF plans to prioritize the construction of key public gender-responsive infrastructure projects, including safe transport and housing, easy access to water and sanitation, and inclusive economic opportunities.



Empowering women through inclusive digital economies

UNCDF promotes digital economies that leave no one behind. Looking to the future, UNCDF will leverage its experience in this area to train women on how to use innovative digital services in their daily lives that will empower them and enhance their ability to contribute equitably to, and benefit equitably from, the growth and prosperity of their countries.

From the gender perspective, this work will present itself through three critical workstreams: (i) leveraging technology and innovation, and partnering with the private sector to remove barriers preventing women from accessing services; (ii) supporting governments to create an inclusive digital policy environment as well as gender-intentional digital public infrastructure that strengthens gender-equality; and (iii) collaborating with public, private and civil society entities and organizations to ensure that women participate in the design of digital products and services.



Enhancing women's resilience to shocks through climate and clean energy financing

Through its work on promoting climate change-resilient communities and local economies, UNCDF provides a standard and internationally recognized country-based mechanism to channel climate finance to local government authorities in LDCs, and for the localization and achievement of the Paris Agreement commitments. UNCDF will strengthen its work on gender-responsive climate finance by identifying and addressing gender-specific barriers to climate finance as well as ensuring women's participation in the design and implementation of climate action.

Liz Ford, 'Russia (joined by China, South Africa, Vietnam and Indonesia) loses UN vote over women's rights in conflict zones', *Guardian*, 30 October 2020

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/30/russia-loses-un-vote-over-womens-rights-in-conflict-zones>

Attempts by Russia to introduce a UN security council resolution, which activists said would have unravelled the rights of women in conflict have failed as 10 countries abstained on a crucial vote on Friday.

The UK, US, Germany and France were among the abstaining member states, which meant the resolution did not gain the nine votes required to pass.

Campaigners said the proposed resolution did not advance women's rights and watered down previously agreed commitments on human rights, prevention of conflict-related sexual violence and women's equal participation in peace negotiations.

This week marks the 20th anniversary of UN resolution 1325, which acknowledges women's role in peacekeeping.

The NGO working group on women, peace and security, said: "The strong show of support by a cross-regional majority of council members today ... is a very welcomed and an encouraging signal to women's human rights defenders, humanitarians and peacebuilders around the world.

"It demonstrates that security council members are willing to draw a line in the sand and take action to block erosion of women's rights."

Grant Shubin, legal director of the Global Justice Center, said: "Every country who withheld its vote for this unnecessary and



dangerous resolution should be applauded. The women, peace and security agenda is anchored in human rights and this resolution could have turned back the clock on 20 years of progress.

“Women in conflict-affected countries are suffering catastrophic impacts due to Covid-19. Any attack on this critical tool for advancing women’s health and rights is dangerous and we’re glad to see a diverse group of nations stand up for the agenda and its bold commitments to gender equality.”

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the security council’s resolution 1325, the first to recognise women’s unique and disproportionate experience of conflict and demand their equal role in peace negotiations, operations and reconstruction. Since then nine more resolutions have been adopted.

But there are huge gaps in implementation. The recent rollback on women’s rights globally has made further progress difficult.

Last year a resolution introduced by Germany to combat wartime rape was only passed when references in the text to sexual and reproductive health and rights were removed to suit the US.

In a special session of the security council on Thursday, both the UK and Germany indicated they would not vote for Russia’s resolution, introduced while it held the presidency.

Both countries said they would not allow a retreat on women’s rights.

China, South Africa, Vietnam and Indonesia joined Russia to vote for the resolution.

‘Not one country has gender equality, says UN Women, *BBC News*, 6 March 2015

<https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-31760988>.



It's been 20 years since 189 countries signed up to a plan for parity between the genders, but Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka says none have yet achieved it.

During the conference, in Beijing in 1995, then-US First Lady Hilary Clinton said: "Human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights."

There has been progress, Mlambo-Ngcuka says, but the world hasn't reached "tipping point" with more work needed.

Women in leadership



Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka is calling for men to join UN Women

Mlambo-Ngcuka told Associated Press that a girl born today would be an 81-year-old

grandmother before she had the same opportunity as a man to be CEO of a company. She would also have to wait until she is 50 before she had an equal chance of leading a country.

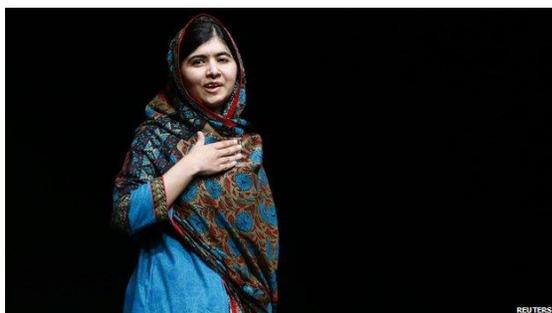


Germany's Angela Merkel was one of the few women leading a nation

Mlambo-Ngcuka pointed out that there were fewer than 20 female heads of state and government and the number of women lawmakers had increased from 11% to just 22% since the Beijing conference.

"We just don't have critical mass to say that post-Beijing women have reached a tipping point in their representation," she said.

Violence against women



Malala Yousafzai, the youngest ever winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, was shot by the Taliban on her school bus

Both the lack of women in powerful, decision-making roles and violence against women are "global phenomena", Mlambo-Ngcuka said.

"The sheer scale of the use of rape that we've seen post-Beijing [especially in conflicts], I think tells us that the women's bodies are viewed not as something to respect, but as something that men have the right to control and to abuse."

She wants world leaders to speak out "very strongly and very openly" against sexual violence and oppose the denial of women's rights.

Women and reproduction



Many women, both in Nigeria and around the world, joined the Bring Back our Girls campaign

The conference in Beijing recognised that women have the right to control their own sexuality without coercion. It also acknowledged their freedom to decide if and when to have children.

These issues, which caused the most controversy in Beijing, are still the most divisive during UN negotiations, Mlambo-Ngcuka says.

"Instead of becoming a norm... there has been resistance to those rights - deadly resistance as we have seen now in the Middle East," she says, also referring to the girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria who are to have been sold to men as wives without any rights.

The future of gender equality



Emma Watson is a UN Women ambassador and part of the *He for She* campaign

Promoting gender equality must become a priority for the world's leaders - and Mlambo-Ngcuka says it isn't right now.

In addition to marking International Women's Day on Sunday, her comments come ahead of a meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women.

They will look at the action plan that was created in 1995 and see what still needs to be done to achieve its aims.

The 150-page document called for governments to close the gender gap in 12 critical areas including human rights, health, education, employment and political participation.



Just this week, men in Afghanistan wore burqas to show solidarity with women

Mlambo-Ngcuka says many of the problems are a result of male domination and the key to

equality is for men and boys to give up the privileges of patriarchy that they gain, simply by being born.

UN Women is looking for 10 world leaders, 10 CEOs and 10 universities to "break the mode" and work with their He for She campaign which asks men to stand up in support of equality for women.

If that happens, "we've got something to work with, taking the campaign forward," she says.

Sonia Elks, 'Keeping girls in school seen worth billions to developing nations', *Reuters*, 26 October 2020

<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/keeping-girls-in-school-seen-worth-billions-to-developing-nations-idUSKBN27C006/>

Making sure all girls are finishing secondary education by 2030 could boost the gross domestic product (GDP) of developing countries by 10% on average over the next decade, a report said on Tuesday.

Every \$1 spent on girls' rights and education would generate a \$2.80 return - equivalent to billions of dollars in extra GDP, according to the study by rights group Plan International and financial services firm Citi's Global Insights team.

"COVID-19 recovery plans that prioritise investment in girls' education and well-being will help communities and economies build back better and stronger," said Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen, chief executive of Plan International.

Some 130 million girls worldwide were already out of school before COVID-19, according to the United Nations cultural agency UNESCO, which said more than 11 million may not return to classes after the pandemic.



Girls are more likely than boys to miss out on school, U.N. children's agency UNICEF says. Many families choose to invest in sons over daughters, while violence, poverty and child marriage also impact their access to education.

The new report, which was based on a study of eight developing and emerging-market nations including India, Egypt, Uganda, Bolivia and Laos, called for a "holistic" approach with measures spanning education, health and violence-prevention.

Some low-income countries could struggle to ensure that all girls are completing their schooling within the next decade, the report said.

But it noted that the target is included in a set of ambitious development goals signed by world leaders in 2015, and that boosting women's inclusion could help increase well-being and prosperity across wider society.

"Eradicating barriers to girls' education and development may hold the key to achieving many of the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals," said Andrew Pitt, Citi's global head of research, in a written comment.

The study was welcomed by women's rights group Equality Now, which said more action was needed to tackle gendered barriers to education.

"The ability to complete formal schooling as a child is critical to economic, social and political success as an adult," lawyer Alexandra Patsalides at Equality Now told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"When girls are shut out of these opportunities, it means a generation of women are also negatively impacted," she said.

Harriet Sherwood, et al., 'What has the United Nations ever done for women?' *Guardian*, 10 September 2015

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/10/un-womens-rights-feminism-equality>.

More girls in schools, fewer mothers dying in childbirth: the UN reports progress in female rights, but the pay gap, forced marriage and domestic violence persist

It was a milestone for the world's women: a global summit aimed at transforming the lives of half of humanity. Equality, reproductive rights, maternal health, political representation, social repression, forced marriage, FGM, rape and domestic violence: the message from Beijing in 1995 was that it was time to act.

Among the 17,000 participants were some of the world's most prominent women, including Hillary Clinton, Benazir Bhutto, the Kenyan environmental and political activist Wangari Maathai, and Madeleine Albright. Aung San Suu Kyi sent a keynote address by video. The declaration – an agenda for change and a call to action – was signed by 189 countries. The summit's organiser, the [United Nations](#), was rightly proud.

Twenty years on, progress is hard to chart. There have been improvements. Fewer women are dying in childbirth, more are holding political office, and FGM has shot up the agenda. But overall the picture is mixed. Abortion rights are still patchy, violence against women – including rape as a weapon of war – is prevalent, and proper economic equality still a distant dream. Some 37,000 girls are forced into marriage every day. More than 200m women still have no access to modern methods of family planning. As the UN marks its 70th birthday this autumn, half of humankind may still ask: what has been achieved for us?

One answer can be found in a small village in Gujarat. Here, the good news is that a woman was recently elected head of the village council for the first time. The bad news is that it took Manjuben Mohanbhai Makwana a month to summon up the courage to enter her own office.



Manjuben Makwana, 45, head of Amargarh village council. An illiterate, low-caste woman, Makwana now exercises real power in her village. Photograph: Anu Anand

“I was one of 12 women elected to the council, but none of us had ever been inside,” she said. “Our husbands ruled in our names.”

An illiterate, low-caste woman who dropped out of school aged five, Makwana broke centuries of tradition that day by lifting the veil from her face, looking the men of Amargarh village in the eye, and asking one of them to vacate her seat.

He laughed, she recalled. “‘Women sit on the floor here, not in chairs,’ he said. ‘And men rule.’”

The example of Gujarat shows that raw data is only half the story. Female representation [has surged around the world](#): there are now 11 parliaments in the world where more than 40% of MPs are women, and nine female heads of government.

In India, after two decades of affirmative action policies, a third of village council seats are reserved for women. But in the Bhavnagar district of Gujarat, where Makwana lives, about

70% of female representatives govern only on paper, as proxies for men, according to [Anandi](#), an organisation that trains rural women for leadership. In April, India’s prime minister Narendra Modi – who ruled Gujarat state before last year’s national election – called for an end to the culture of “husband rule”.

Slowly and with great difficulty, activists in Gujarat are helping women – particularly those from low castes such as 45-year-old Makwana – to participate fully. She has started to tackle basic corruption and a lack of financial transparency with the help of her husband, Mohanbhai, who can read and write.

And they are being encouraged and assisted by [UN Women](#), the agency established in 2010 as a “global champion for women and girls”. UN Women points to its work in India to help women become effective local leaders as a prime example of its achievements – adding that women taking part in local decision-making transforms the lives of families and the most deprived in the community.

According to its deputy executive director Lakshmi Puri, the agency was “the first global institution created by the international community to promote and achieve gender equality, women’s empowerment and women’s rights – all critical areas of human endeavour and aspiration”.

With almost 2,000 staff in more than 90 countries and an annual budget of \$690m, its key aims are improving women’s participation in public life, ending gender-based violence and advancing economic equality.

But in the complex and often fragmented world of the UN, some issues critical to women’s lives – such as maternal health, reproductive rights, sanitation and FGM – fall within the remit of other UN agencies, or even between the cracks.

The UN’s millennium development goals helped focus attention on issues such as pregnancy care

and childbirth. In the past 25 years, maternal mortality – primarily the province of the World [Health](#) Organisation and the UN Population Fund - has fallen globally by 45%. But developing countries still account for 99% of the deaths, with more than half in sub-Saharan Africa.

The 20 years since the [Beijing declaration](#) have not been without progress for women. Maternal mortality has fallen sharply – down by as much as 64% in southern Asia and 57% in south-east Asia. Equality has advanced, though parity is clearly a long way off in most parts of the world.

According to Philomena Okello, a nurse in rural northern Uganda, the millennium targets have made little difference to the women and girls who come through the doors of her hospital in Lira. “Maybe in urban areas, but not deep in the villages,” she said. “The targets should have been set in our environment, not an air-conditioned office but on the ground, where we have no drugs, no beds, no anaesthetic and no electricity.”

For Okello, the real battle is “ignorance, which is still costing the lives of young women in the 21st century”. Women in her area, she added, “are poor; they cannot make decisions; they are uneducated; they are under the rule of the man; they are property”.

She illustrated her point with the story of “Grace”. The 18-year-old was seven months pregnant when high blood pressure caused fits. Her local health centre misdiagnosed malaria but referred her to the hospital when her condition didn’t improve. Meanwhile her family decided she was possessed by demons and sent her to be flushed out by a spiritual healer for three days, while her blood pressure rose further. By the time she arrived at the hospital, it was too late. Eclampsia – easily treated – cost her her life.

UN Women liaises closely with other UN agencies, but also has to respect bureaucratic

and organisational demarcations. According to Puri, it focuses on creating a framework of standards, strengthening national laws and intergovernmental agreements, and pushing for gender equality to be an integral element of action and agreements on all issues, including climate change, financial and economic measures, peace and security.

It also runs high-impact campaigns to challenge attitudes, and creates strategic partnerships with civil society organisations and grassroots groups. “There is an umbilical cord between us and women’s organisations. We steer, support, convene, and help them get political traction at local, national and global regional level. This is a key aspect of what we stand for.”

In Chile, UN Women issues more than a dozen small grants of about \$25,000 each year in programmes to empower women in the workplace and reduce gender-based violence – a major issue in Latin America.

One grant, made jointly with the European Union, went to a group of young professionals who, tired of constant cat-calling and insults, organised a campaign against sexual harassment in the streets. They welcomed the UN’s backing. “It’s not the money really, it’s the prestige of having UN Women behind you that opens doors,” said sociologist Francisca Valenzuela, 25.



Women demonstrate against femicide outside Chile’s presidential palace in Santiago this summer. Photograph: Martin Bernetti/AFP/Getty Images

She and her fellow campaigners used the grant to conduct polls on the extent of sexual harassment. The findings were then publicised on city buses and social media. As a result, so many lawyers volunteered for the campaign that the group was able to draft a law against sexual harassment in the streets, which is soon coming up for a vote in the Chilean congress. “This project came from civil society, from young women who began to question this. We created the project and launched the law,” said Valenzuela.

“What we want here is to open up the spectrum of what is considered violence against women,” said María Inés Salamanca, UN Women’s programme director in Santiago. “The law in Chile only covers domestic violence, not violence in public spaces.”

UN Women has also helped to fund a union of domestic housekeepers to fight for better working conditions. Many maids come from abroad to work in Chile, where they face working 15-hour days and are at high risk of rape by young Chilean men.

In contrast to many countries where it struggles for visibility, UN Women has a special status in Chile. President Michelle Bachelet was its founding director and was elected to her second presidential term in December 2013 with a clear promise to push a women’s rights agenda, including increased political participation by women and an end to Chile’s harsh anti-abortion laws.

In one of just six countries in the world that maintains an absolute ban on abortion, Chilean politics is still beholden to both the Catholic church and an entrenched political elite far more conservative than the general public.

In other countries too, some women’s organisations and activists say that UN Women is hampered by the entrenched power of religious and state institutions that seek to block real gender equality.

One close observer of UN agencies that deal with women’s rights said rightwing religious organisations engaged in “hardcore lobbying” against the liberalisation of abortion laws. “When you sit in the canteen at the UN [headquarters in New York], you see all these groups setting up camp with their little abortion dolls, lobbying and nobbling. When you inch forward with anything to do with women’s rights at the UN, you face immediate pushback,” she said.

Sylvia Walby, a gender expert at Lancaster University, said the US government often worked in tandem with the Catholic church on gender issues. “The US has been the crucial actor in blocking the UN agencies being able to address issues of sexual and reproductive rights. There have been the most extraordinary coalitions between the US and the Catholic church.”



Lakshmi Puri of UN Women Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Puri rejected any suggestion that UN Women had been reluctant to confront the Catholic church or other organisations seen as opponents of women’s rights. “We’ve been absolutely unequivocal in working against anything that masquerades as culture, religion or tradition that violates or undermines the rights of women,” she said. The agency had instead “sought to

engage faith-based groups across the different religions ... in order to change the way faith interprets gender equality and women's empowerment”.

More general criticism of UN Women and other bodies dealing with women's rights comes from analysts and activists, most of whom would only speak to the Guardian off the record. Some said that UN Women was too focused on lobbying at government level and writing endless reports at the expense of helping the grassroots women's organisations best placed to effect concrete change.

“They have not lived up to the promise that a lot of civil society activists and advocates who fought for this entity were really hoping for,” said one. “They haven't been a grassroots ally.”

“Their rhetoric needs to be matched by action. They speak about ‘empowerment’ all the time, but they need to be more practical and challenging. We need a lot more investment in linking grassroots activists to the global lobbying,” said another.

A third accused UN Women of “writing reports that simply repeat reports that have already been written” – although she conceded that this was a general feature of UN agencies. “‘Advocacy’ is a way of pretending you're changing the world when you're not.”

At this year's [Commission on the Status of Women](#), an annual UN conference to review progress on implementing the recommendations of the Beijing declaration, almost 800 women's organisations backed a statement from the Women's Rights Caucus criticising the commission's communique as “a bland reaffirmation of existing commitments that fails to match the level of ambition in the Beijing declaration and platform for action, and in fact threatens [a major step backward](#)”.

But there is praise too. “UN Women has made an important contribution in creating standards

... to push governments to introduce equal rights legislation,” said one activist. However, she added: “There was great jubilation at its creation but now there is a sense that while it has tackled some issues head on, it has not been very outspoken on the greatest threat to women's rights – the rise of illiberal movements across the globe.”

Walby said UN Women's most positive contribution had been its campaign to end violence against women. “It's made [the issue] impossible to ignore and it has set standards.” More generally, she added, UN Women had “provided a space in which civil society groups can engage at a local level. It's been an important facilitator of transnational cooperation on gender equality.”

Some critics were sympathetic to the hindrances faced by UN Women. “It's under-resourced, the small new kid on the block, still establishing itself politically. Its mandate is normative policy work in New York, but it's also operational – and most of its country teams are pretty small while expectations are high,” said one.

“Those are very real concerns. But I also think that as an entity it needs to step up a little more and take on some of the more controversial issues. It needs to be a little more feisty on women's rights – and that's something you hear from lots of civil society partners working regularly with UN Women. I don't think it's really found its footing as a stropy women's rights voice – and that's what we'd like it to be.”





Bernadette Chirac, then French first lady, and Jane Fonda applaud during a seminar on women and health at the Beijing conference in 1995. Photograph: Marcello Soubhia/AFP/Getty Images

The UK government assessed UN Women in March 2013 as part of an [aid review](#), concluding it had made progress on all measures on which its chief predecessor, Unifem, had been judged weak and poor value for money two years earlier. UN Women, the report said, had given more authority to regional and country offices, and had made improvements on costs, transparency and accountability. This month, the UN general assembly will endorse a new set of goals to tackle global poverty, inequality and climate change over the next 15 years. The sustainable development goals [SDGs] – which replace the millennium development goals adopted in 2001 – are expected to include strong commitments to women’s rights and gender equality.

But women’s rights organisations fear pushback when it comes to their implementation. “There is cause for celebrating the commitments made for women and girls in the agreed outcome document for the SDGs. This feeling, however, is bittersweet. For feminists and activists demanding a systemic transformation to global development, the 2030 agenda is weak on providing the financial and structural changes needed to make this outcome document a reality,” said Ana Inés Abelenda, economic justice coordinator at the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID).

Puri was optimistic. “We are working closely with all constituencies, partners and civil society to ensure we have the strongest ever reflection of the gender equality agenda and commitment. This is a never-before opportunity, an acceleration moment, and we’ve already waited two millennia. We hope that every country, city and village will seize it. This is something that will never come again.

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