



## A United Nations Accountability Plan to Empower Women and Further Gender Equality

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The United Nations is successfully implementing a plan to empower women in all branches of its activities. Known as the United Nations System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, the new framework measures, monitors and encourages progress toward specific gender equality goals in all United Nations agencies; and it also provides a model that could be adopted by corporations, national governments, and non-governmental organizations committed to gender equality.

### The Need for Standards and Regular Reporting

Prioritizing gender equality makes sense at the United Nations for several reasons. Inclusive practices improve organizational functioning, and international human rights norms shine the spotlight on advancement and equality for women. Gender equality is stressed, for example, in the Declaration of Human Rights, as well as in multiple human rights treaty provisions to which a majority of the world's nations are party, such as Article 1 of the United Nations Charter and specific Millennium Development Goals. As one of the world's foremost norm-setting bodies, the United Nations realizes it must lead by example.

The System-Wide Action Program offers guidance and holds all parts of the United Nations accountable for gender equality and inclusiveness in every aspect of work, including peace-keeping, conflict resolution, and mediation.

- Resources to promote equality are ensured, ranging from the procurement of gender-suitable bulletproof vests for all members of police and military contingents to adequate funding for programs devoted to furthering equality between the genders.
- Fifteen Performance Indicators provide a sliding scale to measure progress toward gender equality. The indicators are organized around six main undertakings: strengthening accountability; enhancing results-based management; establishing oversight; allocating sufficient human and financial resources; developing and/or strengthening staff capacity and competency; and coordinating efforts at the global, regional and national levels.

In 2012, United Nations entities started reporting annually on each indicator, and by 2017 all are expected to meet or exceed the performance goals. The United Nations now has an accountability framework of the sort requested by Member States, and as progress continues, mainstreaming gender equality and the empowerment of women may become prominent achievements defining Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's legacy. He has long been committed to gender equality and female empowerment.

## **A Generalizable Approach to United Nations Accountability?**

As the United Nations System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women evolves, it increases confidence that resources invested by Member States are having intended, measurable impacts to solve key problems. Furthermore, with uniform reporting and quantifiable indicators of progress, the United Nations is now able to see strong points and weaknesses system-wide. Baseline findings from 2013 reporting indicate that United Nations entities are meeting or exceeding requirements for 31% of the Performance Indicators, and coming close for another 43%. Based on reports about additional resources needed, leaders at United Nations Women office estimate full attainment of goals by 2017 would take an additional \$27 million – not a large a sum as development budgets go.

The new system can be replicated to meet other United Nations challenges. Donor countries have criticized the global organization for loose accountability. But now, inspired by the early successes of the gender accountability system, officials in other key areas of United Nations work are moving to create their own system-wide accountability frameworks. For example, a youth system now exists and an accountability system for sustainable development practices at the United Nations is also being formulated. Imitation is the best form of flattery, and certainly here the work on meeting gender equality goals has shown the way forward for other areas of United Nations functioning. The system-wide accountability system for gender equality shows that a myriad of United Nations entities, each with its own personnel and mandate, can put aside differences and move forward together toward meeting mandated goals using similar methods.

## **A Model for Businesses, Governments, and Nonprofits**

When it comes to gender equality goals it has preached to the world, the United Nations has boldly decided to hold itself accountable as well. In so doing, it has devised a reporting and accountability approach that businesses, governments and nonprofit nongovernmental organizations can also adapt to improve their own efforts for gender equality.

- Foundations could devise accountability systems to hold themselves to the same gender indicators they expect from their grantees. This would strengthen the credibility of such nongovernmental organizations and enhance their clout in promoting social reforms.
- Nations that are Members of the United Nations could also pursue government-wide accountability. Similar to how the United Nations Women office collects and monitors data from all United Nations bodies, the White House Council on Women and Girls could oversee gender accountability for agencies within the U.S. federal government.
- For businesses, the Women's Empowerment Principles offer a globally recognized set of best practices for women's empowerment in workplaces, communities, and the market. Individual companies could set up accountability frameworks to track the progress of divisions and offices toward fulfilling these principles.

An effective institutional innovation at the United Nations can, in short, have wide reverberations – not just setting a model for greater accountability within the United Nations itself, but also showing a way forward for other kinds of institutions. The System-Wide Accountability System reveals that, difficult as change may be to achieve in large, diverse institutional settings, progress can be precisely measured and efforts coordinated to

enable steady progress toward a more equitable, gender-equal world.