

Regional Evaluation of Civil Society Engagement in the Americas and Caribbean

Terms of Reference

1. Introduction

As the United Nations entity on gender equality and women's empowerment, UN Women works to develop and uphold standards and create an environment in which every woman and girl can exercise her human rights and live up to her full potential. The organization regularly evaluates its work to enhance accountability, inform decision making, and contribute to learning. Regional evaluations in UN Women are conducted by the Independent Evaluation Service (IES), which will lead this independent exercise of UN Women's engagement with civil society in the Americas and Caribbean region in parallel to its global evaluation of the same theme focused on the leave no one behind (LNOB) principle. This evaluation is being undertaken as part of the UN Women Corporate Evaluation Plan 2022-2025 with a view to feed into the implementation of the Americas and Caribbean Regional Office (ACRO) Strategic Note 2022-2025.

In this context, these Terms of Reference outline the main parameters for launching the regional evaluation. The exercise seeks to operationalize the following guiding principles aligned with the UN Women Evaluation Policy:¹ responsiveness to UN Women's strategic priorities in the Americas and Caribbean region; timeliness, relevance and utility to the most critical programmatic and operational needs of the organization; as well as innovation and flexibility to implement efficient and effective approaches in evaluating UN Women work.

2. Intended users of the evaluation

The primary intended users of the evaluation are UN Women senior management and programme staff involved with civil society work at the regional and country levels in the Americas and Caribbean, in particular working closely with civil society organizations (CSOs) through programmatic areas such as ending violence against women and girls. Key global personnel involved in the management and oversight of civil society engagement at the policy level at UN Women headquarters will also be targeted. The evaluation is also intended to be useful for other actors working in this area, particularly civil society partners, as well as United Nations agencies, international and local non-governmental organizations, national governments, and international and regional development partners. Finally, the evaluation will seek to feed into the corporate evaluation exercise led by IES.

3. Background on UN Women's civil society engagement in the region

3.1. Regional context overview

In the Americas and Caribbean region, the voice of civil society has historically acted as a critical force in the defense of human rights for greater gender equality and women's empowerment. Women's and feminist movements represented through CSOs have shaped systemic change across the region over the past several decades, organizing into social movements that have sought to more fully actualize human rights,

¹ UN Women, Evaluation Policy (UNW/2020/5/Rev.1).

including “better access to education, healthcare, and urban services”.² Feminist movements have influenced awareness and action against key structural problems such as violence against women and girls, and questioned traditional political paradigms and an equal participation in democratic institutions.³

The role of women’s and feminist movements have also provided a key impetus for reaching consensus in the construction of the regional agenda proposed by the governments at regional conferences over the past several decades.⁴ CSOs have had an important role in international conferences at the regional level focused on gender equality, starting from the first regional conference on women in the region convened in Havana in 1977, which was held following the World Conference of the International Women’s Year in Mexico in 1975.⁵ Outcomes of these seminal events called for national plans and strategies to be sensitive to the needs and problems of different categories of women and of women of different age groups, recognizing as a key principle the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to “contribute to the advancement of women by assisting women to take advantage of their opportunities, by promoting education and information about women’s rights, and by co-operating with their respective Governments.”⁶

In 2016, the Montevideo Strategy agreed at the XIII Regional Conference on Women proposed a framework for the Regional Gender Agenda that positioned women’s autonomy as a condition for change in the situation of women and in the social, political, economic and daily life of the countries in the region. In addition to engaging the entire State structure in the achievement and consolidation of the agenda, the strategy premised its success on the “active engagement by civil society in all its diversity in public policy monitoring and evaluation and follow-up of commitments, especially by women’s and feminist movements and organizations, and those representing young, indigenous, Afro-descendent and rural women, migrant women, older women, women with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) persons, as well as academia, trade unions and human rights defenders.”⁷ A Regional Fund to Support Women’s and Feminist Movements was established in 2018 to support the development of projects that contribute to women’s empowerment, materialization of their rights, and gender equality. The fund is administered by UN Women and operates on the basis of voluntary contributions and facilitated the first grants in 2022 based on contributions from the Government of Mexico and UN Women.

Despite this central historical role played by civil society in the construction and implementation of the regional gender agenda, there has been evidence of a regression in human rights and accordingly a shrinking space for civil society to defend the rights of women and girls, including due to restrictive legislation and discrimination. Such pushback on women’s rights has been a cause of concern for civil society representatives, noting the setbacks introduced by regressive policies and vulnerability of human rights defenders. In fact, human rights defenders in Latin America operate in one of the most dangerous regions for activists: 138 were killed in Colombia in 2021 alone, in addition to other targeted killings of land, environmental and indigenous peoples’ rights defenders in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras,

² Stephanie Rivera Berruz, “Latin American Feminism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.): plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-latin-america.

³ Vargas, Virginia, ‘Feminism and Democratic Struggles in Latin America’, in Rawwida Baksh and Wendy Harcourt (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Transnational Feminist Movements*, 5 May 2015.

⁴ ECLAC, ‘Palabras de Alicia Bárcena, Secretaria Ejecutiva de la Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), con ocasión del Foro de las Organizaciones Feministas de América Latina y el Caribe en el marco de la XIV Conferencia Regional sobre la Mujer de América Latina y el Caribe, Santiago, Chile, 27 January 2020.

⁵ The first instance of the regional conference was called the Regional Conference on the Integration of Women in the Economic and Development of Latin America.

⁶ Report of the World Conference of the International Women’s Year, Mexico City, Mexico, 19 June – 2 July 1976 (E/CONF.66/34).

⁷ ECLAC, *Montevideo Strategy for Implementation of the Regional Gender Agenda within the Sustainable Development Framework by 2030*, March 2017 (LC/CRM.13/5).

Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru.⁸ This situation demonstrates the ongoing challenges faced by CSOs engaging in social change, particularly regarding issues such as the defense of the environment and investigation of corruption, and equally with a gender-based violence (GBV) dimension suffered by many activists in the form of threats, sexual violence and harassment.

3.2. Organizational context

Civil society represents for the United Nations a core constituent group for building a better, safer and more sustainable world towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Civil society organizations (CSOs) are defined as non-state, not-for-profit, voluntary entities formed by people in the social sphere.⁹ Broadly, work between the United Nations and CSOs is framed through the participation of civil society in the follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda and intergovernmental processes. This allows for CSOs with consultative status with the Economic and Social Council to share information such as reporting on key issues and human rights concerns and contribute to discussions at the Commission on the Status of Women and major international conferences. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) also supports CSO participation at the regional level through the Mechanism for civil society participation in the Sustainable Development Agenda and in the Forum of Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development.

UN Women recognizes civil society as a main partner. During implementation of its Strategic Plan 2018-2021, the organization reinforced its alliance with CSOs in the Americas and Caribbean through meetings, dialogues, and funding. In 2021, a regional fund for feminist organizations and movements was launched with governments, CSOs and ECLAC under the aegis of the Regional Women's Conference with grants to 18 CSOs supporting response to COVID-19. In addition, UN Women has promoted substantive participation of CSOs in regional and global forums through regional dialogues and events. Work with CSOs in the region spans across the normative, coordination and programmatic triple mandate of UN Women, including collaboration through the following notable modalities:¹⁰

- *Knowledge production*, including 13 regional products developed with CSOs participation in 2021, for advocacy, research and joint coordination purposes;
- *Funding* through the Small Grants Agreements programme to 85 organizations intended for small contributions to CSOs to finance a limited range of activities for institutional capacity strengthening;
- *Strategic consultation* in the framework of regional conferences and events, including most recently the Generation Equality Forum held in Mexico along with Paris in 2021 as well as the Regional Women's Conference to be held in November 2022 in Argentina;
- *Partner agreements* with more than 190 organizations for structuring partnerships that support the full or partial implementation of UN Women projects and programmes; and
- *Civil society advisory groups* in major programmes, Country Offices and at the regional level for facilitating effective and structured consultations between CSOs – especially women's organizations – and UN Women.

In its new Strategic Plan 2022-2025, UN Women has highlighted the need for deepening existing partnerships with civil society, and articulated as one of its systemic outcomes for “more women and girls [to]

⁸ Front Line Defenders, Global Analysis 2021: www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/2021_global_analysis

⁹ The definition of CSOs includes but is not limited to community-based organizations (CBOs), NGOs, youth-led organizations, LGBTI organizations, faith-based organizations and academic institutions but the definition of CSOs does not include business or for-profit associations. Source: UN Women, Partner Agreement template, version 24 Sept 2021.

¹⁰ UN Women, Executive Board Regional Briefing: Americas and the Caribbean, 04 May 2022.

exercise their voice, agency and leadership, including through an enabling environment that supports women's and youth organizations".¹¹ Modalities to support civil society and women's organizations continue to include funding, capacity building, technical assistance, strategic dialogue, and implementation. Accordingly, engagement with CSOs is by nature a key organization-wide priority that cuts across all thematic areas of intervention and represents an important operational modality for implementation at the field level.

4. Evaluation objectives and scope

The regional evaluation seeks to realize an independent and formative¹² assessment of UN Women's engagement with civil society in the Americas and Caribbean region that allows to:

- Assess whether UN Women's implementation modalities are well-suited to foster effective achievement of programmatic results with CSOs
- Identify key bottlenecks, challenges, and solutions to engaging efficiently with CSOs through UN Women's main modalities
- Map major civil society initiatives in the region and identify lessons for UN Women senior management and programme staff based on what has or has not been achieved
- Recommend improvements for driving impact with CSO alliances in the region, including those representing LNOB constituencies, to inform implementation of the ACRO Strategic Note 2022-2025

The evaluation's scope will include the regional portfolio over the 2018-2022 period, including related ACRO, Country Office, and programme presence work. This topic was selected, first of all, given the high relevance of CSOs as a primary strategic and implementing partner for UN Women in the region. In parallel to the corporate evaluation on the same topic, a regional evaluation provides an opportunity for learning and enhanced utility through the identification of good practices, lessons and potential operational enhancements. The distinct challenges in the region for CSOs, particularly women's organizations, can allow to support ongoing repositioning of UN Women for more effectively partnering with this group. Additionally, the exercise can provide an independent and objective assessment with data and analysis for use in its implementation of the regional gender agenda with CSOs and key partners. Annex 1 provides a more detailed consideration of eight selection criteria of this strategic evaluation topic.

5. Evaluation questions

To meet the exercise's stated objectives, the following questions will be evaluated based on the key criteria of efficiency, coherence, effectiveness, and sustainability using the standard definitions of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee with the integration of human rights and gender in a cross-cutting manner.¹³ The below areas may be further refined during the inception phase based on the evaluation's ongoing research and analysis. In these areas of evaluation, the exercise will look to identify lessons across its triple mandate of coordination, programmatic, and normative dimensions for potential application to future programming in the region.

¹¹ UN Women, Strategic Plan 2022-2025 (UNW/2021/6): <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/09/un-women-strategic-plan-2022-2025>

¹² A formative focus seeks to improve the evaluated area by focusing on the identification of strengths and weaknesses, both in terms of area's design and implementation, and to accordingly propose corrective measures that can improve decision-making and management.

¹³ OECD, 'Better Criteria for Better Evaluation: Revised Evaluation Criteria Definitions and Principles for Use', OECD/DAC Network on Development Evaluation, Dec 2019.

1. **To what extent have UN Women’s internal systems enabled organizational effectiveness and efficiency for CSO engagement?**
 - 1.1. To what extent have internal systems, including related to the *partner agreements and small grants* modalities, facilitated timely and quality collaboration with CSO partners?
 - 1.2. What are the most critical *enabling and/or constraining factors* for efficient and effective collaboration with CSOs? How can they be further leveraged and/or better addressed?
2. **To what extent has UN Women’s programmatic work effectively leveraged CSO alliances for enabling organizations to support women’s empowerment and gender equality?**
 - 2.1. To what extent have *engagement modalities* enabled effective implementation of results with UN Women and key stakeholders?
 - 2.2. To what extent has *coherence between different thematic/programmatic areas* of UN Women offices in their engagement with CSOs affected results and partnerships?
 - 2.3. To what extent have funding mechanisms such as *small grants agreements* provided an effective means for building capacity and achieving programmatic results?
3. **To what extent has UN Women effectively enabled the inclusion of CSOs in its work to influence gender priorities and policies, including those representing LNOB constituencies?**
 - 3.1. To what extent have *civil society advisory groups* provided a meaningful and useful participatory mechanism for promoting CSO engagement in UN Women’s work?
 - 3.2. To what extent have *strategic dialogue and coordination* effectively facilitated the integration of CSO perspectives into relevant national and regional platforms, policy spaces, and agendas?

6. Evaluation approach and methods

The evaluation will be conducted to enhance organizational learning and improve performance through employed methods and generated evidence. To foster ownership and ensure quality feedback, the evaluation will adopt a bottom-up approach aligned with stakeholder needs. This will help to build learning and adaptation into UN Women’s programming over the 2023-2025 period at the regional level. The evaluation will be transparent and participatory, involving relevant UN Women stakeholders and partners. It will be carried out in accordance with the internal and external guidelines,¹⁴ and explicit emphasis will be placed on the integration of gender equality and human rights principles in the evaluation process.

The evaluation will employ a mixed-method approach through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The evaluation team will develop the design for the evaluation including the approach, evaluation criteria, evaluation questions and matrix, and methodology for data collection and analysis. The evaluation design will be developed during the inception phase of the exercise and presented in the inception report, and data collection methods may include:

- Secondary analysis of programme data including monitoring, reporting, budgetary data, and other relevant metadata from corporate systems
- Semi-structured interviews with UN Women, United Nations, CSO, and other key stakeholders
- Structured desk review of key reference documents and knowledge products for lessons learning identification

¹⁴ This includes internally the UN Women Evaluation Policy and guidelines, as well as externally the United Nations Evaluation Group Norms and Standards, Ethical Code of Conduct, as well as Guidance on Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluation.

- Focus groups with CSO representatives
- Social media analysis of communications and advocacy initiatives
- Survey of selected CSO partners and UN Women personnel¹⁵

The evaluation will be primarily carried out through remote data collection, although in-person observation may be included where feasible of the Regional Women’s Conference and other relevant events. The exercise will also employ analytical frameworks to structure and communicate data analysis, including one or more of the following approaches: a measurement dashboard for use by relevant decision-makers across key metrics of CSO engagement; an appreciative inquiry lens to identify and build on best practices; a strengths-weakness-opportunities-threats framework; process mapping to identify potential bottlenecks for streamlining systems related to CSO engagement; and disaggregated analysis of types of CSO groups for understanding representation with a LNOB lens.¹⁶

The evaluation builds on previous global and regional exercises related to the scope, including a 2020 assessment report commissioned by UN Women on collaboration with civil society.¹⁷ Other evaluative exercises being implemented in tandem will be carefully coordinated to increase synergy and mitigate potential burden on UN Women offices. This includes the IES-led corporate evaluation exercise on civil society engagement with a LNOB focus, as well as a planned global thematic evaluation of the Spotlight Initiative.

7. Evaluation process

The evaluation process consists of the below phases focused on following a consultative and rigorous process for producing the below key evaluation products.

Phase	Deliverables	Timeframe
Preparation	Terms of Reference to structure the exercise, and Reference Group established as principal mechanism for engagement with key stakeholders.	Sept 2022
Inception	Inception Report with a scope, methodology, evaluation matrix (questions, indicators, sources), workplan, portfolio and stakeholder analysis, and evaluability assessment (~20 pages without annexes).	Sept-Oct 2022
Data collection	Collection of primary and secondary information through mixed methods, including key informant interviews; focus groups; in-depth structured desk reviews; three thematic case studies; among others.	Oct-Dec 2022T
Data analysis	Implementation of data analysis through approaches articulated in the inception report to ensure triangulation, integration of human rights, and gender analysis.	Nov-Dec 2022
Synthesis	A presentation detailing the emerging findings of the evaluation will be shared in an internal preliminary findings workshop and with the Reference Group, which will be incorporated into the draft report.	Jan 2023

¹⁵ Given time constraints of partners and UN Women personnel, surveys will aim to strategically sample the cohort for consultation and minimize survey length.

¹⁶ The corporate evaluation TORs indicates the following non-exhaustive list of groups: women living with disabilities; Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI); indigenous women; women who belong to racial or ethnic minorities; women living with HIV/AIDS; girls, young women and adolescents; rural women; migrant women; sex workers; single women headed households (including widows); conflict affected women; women refugees; women in prison and ex-prisoners; and women with Albinism.

¹⁷ Gender at Work, ‘The Power of Partnerships: UN Women’s Collaboration with Civil Society to Advance Gender Equality’, Assessment Commissioned by UN Women, July 2020.

Drafting	A final evaluation draft report will be developed for consultation and validation, including annexes detailing the methodological approach and analytical products.	Feb 2023
Final Report	The final report will be prepared in English and Spanish, including a concise Executive Summary, and present virtually. The report structure will be defined in the inception report (~50 pages without annexes).	Mar 2023
Dissemination and use	Communications products will include an evaluation brief, presentation, final report, and where feasible infographics and data visualizations. ACRO will prepare a management response within 6 weeks.	Mar 2023

8. Evaluation management

This is an independent evaluation led by IES, which is responsible for the management and conduct of the exercise, including the quality of the final products and its presentation to UN Women management. IES will ensure that the evaluation is conducted in accordance with the UN Women Evaluation Policy,¹⁸ United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Ethical Guidelines, and other key guidance documents.¹⁹ Coordination with the IES corporate evaluation will be prioritized to promote synergy and mitigate undue burden on stakeholders.

The **evaluation team** will combine the requisite knowledge and experience in evaluation with a gender lens. An evaluation specialist from IES will conduct the exercise as the Team Leader, manage the evaluation process, constitute a quality assurance system, and provide administrative and substantive support. IES will also support coordination and liaison with concerned UN Women units and field offices. A regional evaluation consultant will support the entire process with substantive and operational support. Any external team member must sign an agreement form based on the UNEG Ethical Guidelines.²⁰

An **Evaluation Reference Group** will help strengthen the relevance of the evaluation process by providing strategic input to key products and ensuring their accuracy. The Reference Group will be composed of key internal and external stakeholders, including UN Women personnel in ACRO and Country Offices; relevant United Nations partners; multilateral organizations; and key governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. The composition of the Reference Group will strive to allow for geographic diversity and gender balance. For feedback on key products, an audit trail will be maintained to track the comments received and responses on how the comments were addressed.

The **quality assurance** of the evaluation will be carried out first through the standard internal IES review and approval of deliverables by the UN Women Chief of Evaluation and IEAS Director, as well as an internal IES peer review mechanism to ensure peer-to-peer quality assurance and knowledge exchange. Based on UNEG guidance and good practices of the international evaluation community, this layer of quality assurance follows UN Women standards.²¹ In addition, the Evaluation Reference Group will provide a second layer of quality assurance as outlined above through review of key evaluation products.

¹⁸ UN Women, [Evaluation Policy](#), UNW/2020/5/Rev.1, 2020.

¹⁹ United Nations Evaluation Group, [UNEG Ethical Guidelines](#), 2008.

²⁰ UN Women, [Code of Conduct Form for Evaluation Consultants](#).

²¹ UN Women, [Guidance Note: Global Evaluation Report Assessment and Analysis System \(GERAAS\)](#), 2021.

Annex 1. Prioritization of evaluation topic

With a view to ensure the relevance and use of the regional evaluation to UN Women management and partners, the below eight parameters were considered to justify the overall thematic selection.

Criterion*	Level of value add of civil society thematic focus**
First level of priority	
1) relevance of the subject	High: CSOs continue to be a core constituency across the region for UN Women's successful implementation of its programmes, and every unit manages partnerships with such actors.
2) risk associated with the intervention	Medium/high: The number of partnerships for implementation of project and programme activities with CSOs, as well as strategic partnerships, constitute a medium-to-high risk for UN Women if not managed well.
3) significant investment	High: While investment in CSOs in the region has not been quantified for these TORs, the wide nature of modalities of cooperation (funding, dialogue, and implementation) are significant.
Second level of priority	
4) demands for accountability from stakeholders	Medium: Internal and external stakeholders, including donors supporting project implementation through CSOs, would nominally take a significant interest in the evaluative results.
5) potential for replication and scaling-up	High: Given the ubiquity of programmatic collaboration with CSOs across the region, conclusions and recommendations on innovative modalities of alliances provide strong potential for scaling.
6) potential for joint or UNDAF evaluation	Low: There is no scope in the proposed exercise for a joint evaluation, although results could lead to identification of future joint work at the country and/or regional level.
Cross-cutting parameters	
7) feasibility for implementing the evaluation	High: The proposed scope and timeline for a focused regional evaluation is feasible assuming several factors such as timely inputs by UN Women and CSO partners.
8) filling a knowledge gap	High: No comprehensive analysis of CSO engagement focused on the Americas and Caribbean region has been performed at a strategic, programmatic or operational level.

*Based on UN Women procedure for planning for strategic and influential evaluations.

**Scale of low to high across the 8 criteria