IN BRIEF

FEMINIST COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION OF UN WOMEN'S
APPROACH TO SOCIAL NORMS CHANGE

This report presents the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Feminist Collaborative Evaluation on UN Women's approach to social norms change. The evaluation was conducted by UN Women's Independent Evaluation Service (IES) of the Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Service (IEAIS) which, in line with the UN Women Evaluation Policy,[1] conducts independent evaluations with the aim of enhancing accountability, informing decision-making and contributing to learning. The evaluation was initiated April 2023, with a focus on insights on social norms efforts implemented globally across UN Women

BACKGROUND

The Beijing Platform for Action recognized discriminatory social norms as a fundamental barrier to women's ability to enjoy their human and socioeconomic rights. Data from the Social Institutions and Gender Index[2] note that "the inequalities observed and experienced by women and girls are just the tip of the iceberg: discriminatory norms and social institutions rest below the surface, reinforcing the status quo." [3] Social norm change plays a pivotal role in advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by empowering women to actively contribute to, and benefit from, progress across all Sustainable Development Goals.

UN agencies, including UN Women, are increasingly acknowledging that addressing social norms will pave the way for addressing gender inequality through transformative norm change. The UN Women Strategic Plan 2022–2025 adopted an explicit outcome dedicated to social norms, Outcome 3: "Positive social norms, including through engaging men and boys."

While the inclusion of social norms as a specific UN Women Strategic Plan outcome has been a recent development, UN Women programming has addressed social norms change as a strategy directly or indirectly in both its broader advocacy on gender equality and in its programmatic work.

The Independent Evaluation Service undertook a formative evaluation of UN Women's approach to social norms change to support the production of real-time insights to feed into the development of the social norms outcome area and facilitate learning about approaches aimed at changing social norms to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment. A Feminist Collaborative Approach was employed entailing systematically identifying opportunities for collaboration with stakeholders in the planning and implementation of the evaluation, while applying the feminist principles shared by the Policy Programme and Intergovernmental Division (PPID) on social norms and adapted by the Independent Evaluation Service.

---

[1] UN Women (2020). Evaluation Policy of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women available at https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/08/evaluation-policy-of-the-united-nations-entity-for-gender-equality-and-the-empowerment-of-women

[2] The Social Institutions and Gender Index, conducted by OECD Development Centre, is a cross-country measure of discriminatory social institutions, covering 160 countries.

[3] Social Institutions and Gender Index 2023 Global Report: Gender Equality in Times of Crisis. Available at: https://oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/4607b7c7-en/1/3/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/4607b7c7-en&_csp_=a6be4df33c99961512705b97977ea566&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book

HOW THE EVALUATION WAS CONDUCTED: SOURCES AND METHODOLOGIES FOR DATA COLLECTION

Collaborative Evaluation

Collaborative Evaluation is an evaluation in which there is a significant degree of collaboration between the evaluator and stakeholders in the evaluation process (Rodriguez-Campos, L., 2005). A Collaborative Evaluation stance requires evaluators to enhance evaluation activities by creating environments that invite and allow stakeholder involvement. The Feminist Collaborative Evaluation identified opportunities for collaboration with key stakeholders:

Country level: Co-creation with UN Women Country Office staff and engagement of women's rights activists as an advisory group

Regional level: Co-creation workshops including social norms focal points

Headquarters level: Points of collaboration identified throughout the process including approach, Experts Group Meeting and sharing of information

---

mixed methods data

Mixed methods and participatory data collection : qualitative and quantitative data collected and triangulated.

7 surveys conducted

Personnel survey for case study countries.
Male: 11 | Female: 71
Response Rate: 46.3 % (N=82/177)

200+ documents reviewed

Desk review, meta-synthesis of evaluations, portfolio analysis, reports, strategic documents, external mapping on social norms efforts etc.

432 Stakeholders engaged Through Key informant interviews and focus group discussions

---

7 case study countries across 4 regions

311 individuals consulted through the case studies:

185 members of the community

101 stakeholders from the UN Women case study offices

98 external partners (UN, Implementing Partners, CSOs. Government)

28 members of the advisory groups

---

case study countries and thematic focus of social norms efforts

Caribbean (Barbados and Grenada)

Serbia

Kyrgyzstan

Nepal

Mexico

Ethiopia

Samoa

Ending violence against women

Women's economic empowerment

Leadership/Governance

Campaign

HIV

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The UN Women Strategic Plan 2022–2025 was not accompanied by a clear organizational plan on how to support implementation of the new social norms systemic outcome area, and work to articulate a coherent approach across the organization was ongoing during this evaluation. Widely acknowledged internally is the need to build internal coherence and competencies around the approaches applied to address social norms given the disconnect that persists between organizational units on conceptual approaches for social norms programming. The evaluation concluded that there is clear rationale for UN Women to clarify and strengthen its approach to social norms work given its centrality to UN Women's efforts. However, progress against the outcome may be limited without significant investment in strengthening institutional capacity and organizational buy-in on a common approach, language and principles for social norms programming.

Experience based on the roll-out of the social norms systemic outcome area highlights broader organizational challenges in bridging silos that the Strategic Plan 2022–2025 set out to address through the establishment of the systemic outcomes and the evaluation concluded that bridging of these silos needs to be prioritized. The need for formal mechanisms that facilitate outreach and accountability between units with respect to the systemic outcomes was identified. Social norms programming also highlighted a broader organizational challenge related to fragmented and ad hoc approaches, and lack of accountability for integrating key cross-cutting topics, including LGBTIQ+ rights, transforming patriarchal masculinities, racial justice and disability inclusion.

The evaluation case studies highlight that social norms must be understood within the local context and that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach. Methodologies must be tailored and contextualized, and better still, built from the bottom up in a participatory and collaborative manner. While sometimes implicit, several social norm change approaches that action feminist principles and were rooted in paradigms from the global south were identified. These approaches value and prioritize collective and participatory processes rather than application of pre-determined frameworks not owned or developed locally. The evaluation identified the potential for UN Women to provide a menu of methodologies rooted in feminist principles and global south paradigms with respect to the process for identifying social norms and pathways of change. Existing practices within UN Women that embed feminist approaches for social norms programming were highlighted, such as an internal exploration of social norms at the Country Office level as a first step in unpacking common social norms experienced by personnel and exploring their own unconscious bias and undertaking power brokers and institutional analysis.

It is well documented that social norms are difficult to measure.[4] The evaluation identifies that at UN Women these challenges are compounded by several factors identified through the evidence gathered. Evidence of contributions to addressing discriminatory social norms at both community and institutional levels were largely missing due to lack of targeting in programme design and tools to systematically collect data related to social norms change. Challenges include perceived short-term and donor-linked nature of programming efforts. There is a need to both measure change through small-scale initiatives and through longer-term and broader-scale measurement of social norms. Equally important are ongoing measurement approaches, where the constant ebb and flow of social norms change are necessary to track, including where there is backsliding on commitments or actions, backlash or unintended consequences so that it can inform programming adjustments.[5] Attention will be needed to ensure consistency in measurement and reporting against the Strategic Plan. There are several notable measurement approaches which UN Women can learn from, leverage and use to inform guidance for supporting measurement of social norms at various levels of the organization. For example, the Gender Equality Attitudes Survey,[6] the Nepal Country Office Storytelling Initiative,[7] and the Joint Partners for Prevention Programme UN multi-country study on men and violence in 2013 across six countries in Asia and the Pacific[8]. Partnerships with UN sister organizations that have invested in social norms measurement, such as the UNDP Gender Social Norms Index,[9] and programming also present an opportunity for UN Women to broaden the scope and scale of measurement.

---

[4] UN Women Social Norms Discussion Paper, Transforming Patriarchal Masculinities Position Paper, meta-analysis of evaluations, country case studies, etc.

[5] UN Women Discussion Paper: Social Norms, Gender and Development: A Review of Research and Practice, November 2023 available at https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/10/discussion-paper-social-norms-gender-and-development-a-review-of-research-and-practice

[6] The survey was initiated in 2018 with partners including private sector companies: AT&T, Johnson and Johnson, Kantar, Procter & Gamble, and Unilever; and Kantar—a data, insights, and consulting company—was hired to develop and conduct the fieldwork.

[7] The storytelling initiative by UN Women Nepal aims to understand pathways for social norm change and promote gender equality through storytelling. For more details refer to: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/np-The-Storytelling-Initiative.pdf

[8] Partners for Prevention was a regional joint programme of UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women and UNV for Asia and the Pacific, which ran from 2013 – 2018.

[9] UNDP. (2023). Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI). Available at: https://hdr.undp.org/content/2023-gender-social-norms-index-gsni#/indicies/GSNI . The GSNI consists of four dimensions: political, educational, economic and physical integrity. It is developed using responses to seven questions from the World Values Survey, which are utilized to formulate seven indicators.

The evaluation concluded that for UN Women's social norms programming to be fit for purpose, there is a need for the organization to leverage its added value in application of feminist principles, because communities themselves must define social norms within their diverse settings and co-create pathways of change to realize sustainable and transformative change. Integrating these principles and tools into the organization's programme cycle (for both Strategic Notes and projects) can support better articulation of social norms and a more integrated approach across the thematic areas.

The evaluation identifies that UN Women can add value to the social norms space through its reach to the diverse women and communities it serves, which can facilitate meaningfully engaging communities to unpack social norms and power dynamics and co-create pathways for change. Guidance and capacity-building could be provided on how to conduct collaborative research and co-design processes to meaningfully engage partners in understanding and defining the key social norms that are underlying progress against the Strategic Note. The evaluation identifies opportunities for more systematic engagement with women's organizations across UN Women programming. Civil society is not only critical as partners but also as co-creators in the process of understanding and changing social norms aimed at gender equality and women's empowerment. Working with partners as co-analysers and co-creators will work to shift power dynamics towards prioritizing the voices and knowledge of the communities with which UN Women works. Parts of UN Women have recognized that in addition to identifying "backlash" as a programmatic risk,

strategies to plan for and counter backlash are necessary. In November 2023, UN Women's Civil Society Division shared a "Push Forward Strategy" aimed at establishing a corporate strategy for addressing backlash against women's rights and advocates, yet it has only recently been internally socialized.

The evaluation concludes that UN Women's ability to reach and amplify the voices and knowledge of the women, women's rights defenders, and civil society organizations with which the organization works is also its added value in the social norms space and thus it should prioritize investing in these partners and explicitly strategizing how to mitigate and deal with backlash, especially as it affects the most marginalized groups.

The evaluation noted that coordination with United Nations partners related to social norms is occurring in different ways i.e. through joint programmes, joint guidance and joint advocacy. However, such work is largely ad hoc, project specific and implicitly addressing social norms, which limits the ability to leverage each other's capacities to collectively advance social norms for gender equality at scale. The evaluation recognizes the significant efforts and investments focused on social norms change within the UN system, primarily from the social-behavioural change approach and concludes that UN Women will need to proactively engage, ensure clear messaging on its value added within this space and build its capacities at all levels to be able to meaningfully contribute and complement existing approaches.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1

UN Women should clarify the level of investment the organization seeks for strengthening UN Women's approach to social norms, and in line with this decision adopt a corporate strategy for strengthening related institutional capacity.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Establish clear governance and accountability for action for the systemic outcome for social norms including its implementation from an intersectional perspective.

RECOMMENDATION 3

At the corporate level UN Women should commit to social norms as a central tenet for programming, leveraging UN Women's added value in the social norms space and prioritizing Global South knowledge and equalizing power dynamics with UN Women's key women's rights partners.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Prioritize investing in meaningful collaboration and participatory approaches with women-led organizations and civil society organizations aligned with local needs and explicitly strategizing how to mitigate and deal with backlash, especially as it affects the most marginalized groups.

RECOMMENDATION 5

UN Women should proactively position itself as a key player in UN coordination related to social norms by articulating its unique role and contributions in this area, building relevant capacities to influence dominant approaches to social norms change from a gender perspective and actively seek opportunities to amplify its influence within the UN system and beyond.