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# GETTING UN80 RIGHT: PROTECTING MANDATES WHILE IMPROVING COORDINATION

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Secretary-General launched the UN80 Initiative to improve efficiency and respond to a severe liquidity crisis affecting the United Nations system. Among the proposed reforms is the merger of UNFPA and UN Women, presented as a means to streamline and reduce duplication. This proposal should be rejected.

The evidence shows that consolidation would weaken institutional capacity for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), dilute gender equality mandates, and dismantle specialized infrastructure that has taken three decades to build. In his 15 December 2025 briefing, Guy Ryder confirmed that the Secretary-General will not advance a merger if it weakens existing mandates. Member States must hold him to that commitment.<sup>1</sup>

The process underpinning this proposal is fundamentally flawed. Rather than beginning with an evidence-based diagnosis of what is not working, it advances a predetermined structural solution before identifying the problem it seeks to solve. The proposed merger of UN Women and UNFPA directly contradicts the 2023 independent expert review, which recommended strengthening both agencies instead.<sup>2</sup> Analysis shows that only 20–30 percent of their work overlaps, while the majority of each agency's mandate is distinct.<sup>3</sup> Consolidation would therefore disrupt far more than it would streamline, undermining UNFPA's unique population dynamics and humanitarian SRHR capacities and weakening UN Women's system-wide gender coordination role across more than 40 UN entities, hence diluting both mandates.



The proposal also rests on faulty assumptions. The liquidity crisis is driven by chronic non-payment of assessed contributions, not duplication. SRHR and gender equality are not niche issues limited to “women and girls,” but central to development, humanitarian response, and human rights. Overlap does not inherently signal inefficiency, as demonstrated by other UN agencies with comparable mandate intersections that face no merger proposals. Nor does consolidation guarantee better coordination, which more often depends on clarity of roles and accountability than on institutional structure. The selective targeting of UNFPA and UN Women, both operating in politically contested areas, indicates that this is not a neutral efficiency exercise, but a move that risks weakening gender equality and SRHR at a time of global rollback.

The stakes are immediate: 287,000 women die annually from preventable maternal complications,<sup>4</sup> half in humanitarian settings where UNFPA provides the only coordinated response;<sup>5</sup> 218 million women lack access to modern contraception;<sup>6</sup> progress toward gender equality is reversing globally. Civil society organizations across regions have detailed the specific government partnerships, technical support mechanisms, and service delivery infrastructure that would be lost. The implications extend beyond SRHR and gender equality to the UN's broader human rights architecture, which receives less than 7% of the regular budget yet faces disproportionate 15.2% cuts.<sup>7</sup> When specialized mandates face elimination despite expert evidence recommending strengthening, when member states vote for SRHR commitments while supporting budget mechanisms that dismantle implementation capacity, the gap between rhetoric and practice becomes impossible to ignore.

Member states must: reject the proposed merger; address the liquidity crisis by paying assessed contributions in full and on time; review mandates across the entire UN system, not selectively; replace merger logic with proven coordination solutions; ensure meaningful civil society and national stakeholder engagement; and reaffirm commitment to mandate protection and equity across UN pillars.

# THE BEIJING AND CAIRO AGENDAS - RECOGNIZED GLOBAL PRIORITIES

In 1994 and 1995, member states adopted two landmark frameworks that would define the international community's approach to gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights: the Cairo Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action.<sup>89</sup> These commitments recognized that advancing women's health, rights, and equality was not simply a moral imperative but a development necessity. They established that bodily autonomy, sexual and reproductive rights, and gender equality were foundational to sustainable development - a recognition later codified in SDG 3 (health) and SDG 5 (gender equality). Cairo and Beijing demonstrate that development and human rights are not mutually exclusive goals but mutually reinforcing imperatives. Rights cannot be realized without development progress, and development cannot be sustainable without rights protection.

Thirty years later, the work remains unfinished, and the crises are intensifying. Approximately 287,000 women die annually from preventable maternal complications, with half of these deaths occurring in humanitarian settings.<sup>10</sup> An estimated 218-287 million women lack access to modern contraception.<sup>11</sup> For displaced women and girls in conflict zones, lack of SRHR access is the leading cause of death. At current rates, eliminating discriminatory laws globally will require 286 years.<sup>12</sup> These statistics represent not historical failures but ongoing emergencies that demand strengthened institutional capacity and renewed political commitment.

The institutional architecture established to address these priorities, including UNFPA's mandate on sexual and reproductive health, population and development, and UN Women's mandate on gender equality and women's empowerment, was created because member states recognized that specialized capacity was necessary to translate commitments into reality. These mandates are distinctive in that they bridge the UN's development and human rights pillars - operationalizing rights-based frameworks through concrete development programming while anchoring development work in principles of equity, dignity, and bodily autonomy. UNFPA and UN Women are not confined to a single pillar; they are essential to delivering both. These mandates operate across national, regional, and global levels, providing technical expertise, operational infrastructure, and normative leadership. Critically, many countries most dependent on this infrastructure are in the Global South, where UNFPA provides SRHR programs, contraceptive procurement, technical support for census, and population dynamics planning, and humanitarian SRHR responses, while UN Women advances legal reform and women's political participation.

## THE SECRETARY-GENERAL'S PROPOSAL - WHAT IS ON THE TABLE?

In early 2025, the UN Secretary-General launched the UN80 Initiative - an ambitious reform effort intended to address the UN system's severe liquidity crisis and enhance its ability to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals. The initiative reflects broader recognition that the UN system requires structural adjustments to meet contemporary challenges, though the specific reforms proposed have generated significant concern among member states and civil society regarding their implications for specialized mandates and institutional capacity.

The initiative is organized into three major workstreams:

- **Workstream 1** focuses on efficiencies and internal improvements, including budget adjustments for the 2026-2027 biennium. This workstream proposes significant budget reductions across the UN Secretariat, with disproportionate cuts of 15.2% to the human rights pillar compared to 11.7% to development and 14.2% to peace and security.<sup>13</sup> Human rights currently receives only 6-7% of the regular budget compared to development's 18-19%,<sup>14</sup> meaning these cuts reverse years of advocacy to secure adequate funding for human rights mechanisms.
- **Workstream 2** addresses mandate review and rationalization through an intergovernmental ad-hoc working group. This workstream examines which mandates should be retained, modified, or discontinued based on relevance, effectiveness, and resource requirements. Member states will lead this process through negotiated consensus, though the criteria and methodology for evaluating mandate effectiveness remain under development.
- **Workstream 3** examines structural reform and program realignment across the UN development architecture, including potential consolidations, shared services, and institutional reconfigurations. The proposed merger of UNFPA and UN Women arises from this workstream, which explores options for restructuring to increase coherence and reduce duplication. In the SG's September 2025 report, the merger was listed as one of several structural scenarios to be explored further, alongside adjustments affecting UNAIDS and regional configurations. The final decision making power remains with Member States.

This analysis focuses on Workstream 3, specifically the proposed merger of UNFPA and UN Women.

The merger is not a fait accompli. The UN has commissioned an independent assessment to analyze potential "opportunities" and risks. According to the Terms of Reference released prior to civil society engagement, the assessment may recommend proceeding with a merger, propose modifying the option, or conclude that a merger should not move forward.<sup>15</sup> On December 15, 2025, the UN convened its first civil society consultation on UN80 reforms, providing civil society with its initial opportunity to understand the process. During this briefing, Guy Ryder, Under Secretary-General overseeing the reform process, stated that *the SG has made clear he [SG] would not advance a merger proposal if it would weaken or reduce existing mandates*.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, member states will decide whether the merger proceeds.

However, the process revealed in this consultation raises significant concerns. A Task Force under Ryder's leadership is constituted, with member state consultations underway but civil society engagement severely constrained: organizations are limited to "structured consultations" consisting of interviews, with a single Virtual Town Hall scheduled for Q1 2026, after the assessment has been completed, endorsed by the Steering Committee, and submitted to the SG. Civil society is positioned as a recipient of decisions rather than as a participant in deliberation.

Furthermore, the Terms of Reference make no reference to the 2023 independent expert review that recommended strengthening both agencies, and assessment questions are framed to assume benefits ("How could a merger increase impact?") rather than critically evaluate whether claimed benefits would materialize ("Would a merger increase impact, and under what conditions?").<sup>17</sup> For civil society organizations that spent decades building these mandates through advocacy and negotiation, this process offers no meaningful intervention point to present evidence, challenge assumptions, or defend specialized architecture essential to SRHR and gender equality. Without sustained, evidence-based opposition that demonstrates programmatic risk and centers mandate protection, this proposal will progress from consultation to decision to implementation.

# CRITICAL ASSUMPTIONS DRIVING THIS MERGER

The proposed merger of UNFPA and UN Women rests on several assumptions that warrant rigorous examination. Rather than accept these premises at face value, member states must critically evaluate whether claimed benefits would materialize and what costs would be incurred. The following analysis outlines and challenges the four foundational assumptions underlying Workstream 3's merger proposal.

## Assumption 1: Merger Will Generate Cost Savings and Financial Efficiency

The merger is premised on the assumption that consolidation would reduce operational costs and duplication, and that a merged entity would command greater financial resources. The evidence suggests otherwise.

**The Liquidity Crisis is About Non-Payment, Not Duplication:** Only 25% of member states paid assessed contributions on time in 2025. As of December 30, 2025, only 151 of 193 UN member states had paid their 2025 dues. Non-paying states have accumulated \$1.586 billion in arrears, with 95% owed by the United States alone.<sup>18</sup> As the Brazilian delegation emphasized at the Fifth Committee, "assessed contributions must be paid in full, on time, and without conditions."<sup>19</sup> Persistent arrears, particularly by major contributors, undermine predictability, rational planning, and orderly implementation of mandates." In 2024, the UN returned \$114 million in credits to member states in arrears yet was unable to spend \$255 million due to late payments.<sup>20</sup> This manufactured scarcity is used to justify restructuring, but the root cause is non-compliance with assessed contributions, not institutional duplication.

**A Merged Entity Would Not Be Shielded from Funding Volatility:** UNFPA has consistently experienced dramatic budget fluctuations tied to U.S. administration changes,<sup>21</sup> with funding withdrawn and restored multiple times over the decades, driven by domestic political cycles. These disruptions have forced the agency to build institutional capacity to weather funding shocks, maintain service continuity through alternative financing, and sustain technical expertise despite resource volatility. A newly merged entity would face identical political vulnerabilities. The assumption that consolidation would provide budget stability or protection from donor conditionality is unfounded. Rather than creating resilience, the merger would disrupt the institutional knowledge and operational adaptations that currently enable UNFPA to maintain service delivery despite chronic funding instability.

**Funding Streams Are Not Interchangeable:** Donors that support SRHR and population dynamics programming are not the same as those funding gender equality work, and humanitarian donors operate through distinct mechanisms and budget lines. UNFPA's contraceptive security receives funding from specific global health donors; its humanitarian response is financed through consolidated appeals; its population data work is supported by development statistics funders. UN Women's gender mainstreaming receives support from gender equality portfolios; its normative work is funded by governance donors.<sup>22</sup> Merging the agencies would not automatically pool these resources or make them fungible. Instead, earmarked funding would continue to flow to specific functions, while unrestricted core resources, already chronically inadequate for both agencies, would need to support a larger, more complex institutional structure during a multi-year transition.



# Assumption 2: These Mandates are Primarily About Women and Girls

The assumption that UNFPA and UN Women's work is narrowly focused on women and girls fundamentally misunderstands both mandates' scope and development impact. This mischaracterization is itself part of systematic efforts to diminish their institutional standing.

## **Gender Equality and SRHR Are Cross-Cutting Development Priorities:**

Adolescent pregnancy prevention through contraception and comprehensive sexuality education enables educational completion and workforce entry, strengthening entire economies rather than benefiting individual women alone.<sup>23</sup> Maternal health services that prevent complications protect families from catastrophic health expenditures that trap households in poverty across generations.<sup>24</sup> Family planning allows parents to invest more per child in education and health, producing societal-level development gains.<sup>25</sup> Women's participation in political and economic decision-making improves governance quality and accelerates economic growth for all citizens. Gender-responsive budgeting ensures public resources serve everyone equitably, while addressing unpaid care work enables the labor market to function for both women and men. These are not niche-sector issues affecting only women and girls, but rather foundational prerequisites for sustainable development that benefit families, communities, economies, and entire societies. Framing them as "women's issues" obscures their universal development impact.



**The "Women and Girls" Framing Serves Strategic Purposes:** Growing anti-rights positioning across UN forums signals coordinated efforts to reverse normative gains. The Commission on Population and Development's repeated failure to adopt outcome documents demonstrates its capacity to obstruct consensus language on bodily autonomy, comprehensive sexuality education, and safe abortion access.<sup>26</sup> A documented pattern emerges: mandates that survive norm-setting processes at CSW and CPD, where opposition cannot block their adoption, are subsequently targeted through Fifth Committee budget mechanisms, where resource constraints provide alternative grounds for dismantling institutional capacity. Characterizing these mandates as narrowly focused on "women and girls" rather than as universal development priorities serves to justify deprioritization and budget cuts. UN80 provides institutional architecture to accomplish through efficiency discourse what direct opposition to normative frameworks could not achieve through intergovernmental negotiations. At a time of intensifying global attacks on women's rights and gender equality, the targeting is deliberate, and the framing is strategic.

## Assumption 3: Significant Mandate Duplication Exists Between UNFPA AND UN WOMEN

The merger proposal assumes substantial programmatic overlap that consolidation would eliminate, hence making the work more efficient and effective. However, analysis of their strategic plans reveals the opposite: approximately 20-30% convergence surrounded by 60-70% unique mandates per agency.



Agencies	Overlap	Unique Mandates	Merger Status
UNFPA & UN WOMEN	20-30% (GBV, adolescent health)	60-70% each (UNFPA: population dynamics, humanitarian SRHR, contraceptive security / UN Women: system-wide gender coordination, normative leadership) <sup>27</sup>	<b>Merger Proposed</b>
FAO & WFP	50-60% (food security, emergency response, farmer support, resilience)	40-50% each (FAO: standards/treaties, fisheries, forestry / WFP: logistics, school feeding, cash transfers) <sup>28</sup>	<b>No Merger Proposed</b>

If reducing duplication and increasing efficiency were genuine criteria, the Food and Agriculture Organization (2024 budget: \$3.25 billion)<sup>29</sup> and World Food Programme (2024 budget: \$8.90 billion)<sup>30</sup> would be prime consolidation candidates given their substantially greater programmatic overlap in food security, joint emergency response, shared work on smallholder farmer support, and co-leadership of the Food Security Cluster. Yet they face no merger proposals. UNFPA (2024 budget: \$1.45 billion)<sup>31</sup> and UN Women (2024 budget: \$500 million)<sup>32</sup> demonstrate minimal overlap and low budgets, yet are targeted for consolidation, suggesting this proposal is driven by opposition to rights-based mandates rather than organizational efficiency.



## Assumption 4: Merger Would Improve Coordination

The proposal assumes that consolidating two agencies would automatically enhance coordination and eliminate inefficiencies. The evidence suggests that poor coordination stems from unclear roles and responsibilities, not from institutional separation, and that these agencies already coordinate effectively on shared priorities.

**Coordination Requires Clarity, Not Consolidation:** Poor coordination is driven by ambiguity about which entity leads on specific issues, conflicting accountability structures, and inadequate communication mechanisms. These challenges persist regardless of institutional structure. Territorialism and competing priorities emerge from unclear mandates and resource competition, not from organizational boundaries. Merging entities without addressing underlying role clarity would simply relocate coordination challenges inside a larger bureaucracy while eliminating the specialized technical leadership that currently enables each agency to deliver its unique mandate effectively.

**Overlap Does Not Equal Duplication When Entry Points Differ:** In instances where UNFPA and UN Women do work on common issues, they approach them from distinct technical perspectives that complement rather than duplicate each other. The issue of child marriage provides a clear example:

- **UNFPA** addresses child marriage through the lens of population dynamics and SRHR by analyzing demographic impacts, supporting family planning services that enable delayed pregnancy, providing comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services to prevent adolescent and teen pregnancies, working with health systems to address maternal mortality among adolescent mothers, and providing data on prevalence and trends for evidence-based planning.

- **UN Women** addresses child marriage through gender equality and legal frameworks by supporting legislative reform to raise the minimum age of marriage, challenging discriminatory social norms through its normative and advocacy leadership, ensuring girls' access to education and economic opportunities, convening multi-stakeholder dialogues at global and regional policy forums, and holding governments accountable to international commitments including CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action.
- Additionally, another UN entity, **UNICEF**, addresses child marriage from a child rights perspective by amplifying children's voices, protecting girls from harm through child protection systems, addressing the intersection between child marriage and disrupted education, and integrating safeguards across education, health, and social protection sectors.

Therefore, multiple UN entities working on common issues, such as child marriage, do not constitute duplication since each brings a distinct technical mandate, specialized expertise, and unique value proposition. The solution is clarity about which agency leads specific aspects of the response and how they coordinate, not consolidation that would eliminate specialized capacity. This pattern repeats across numerous development challenges: different agencies contribute complementary technical expertise from their respective mandates, and effective coordination maximizes rather than minimizes this diversity of approaches.



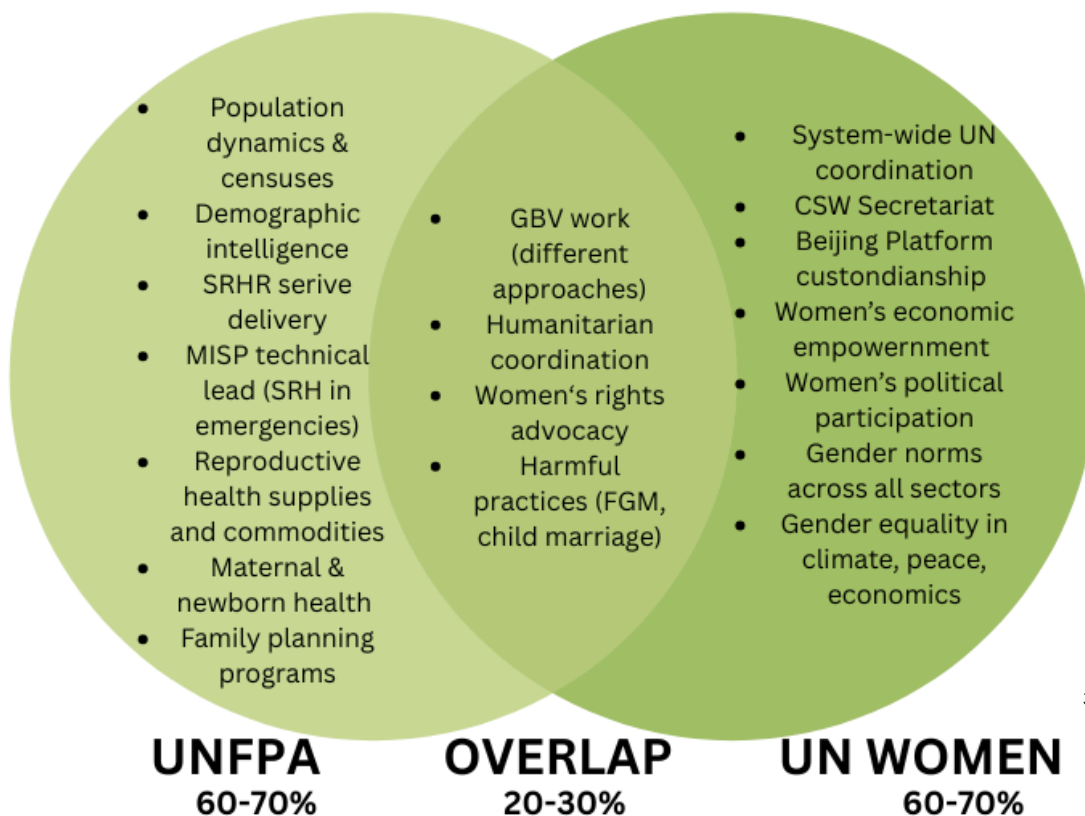
# WHAT IS AT RISK: OPERATIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF THIS MERGER

## UNFPA and UN Women Merger: Why This Dilutes Both

The proposed merger assumes that UNFPA and UN Women's work can be seamlessly combined without operational disruption or loss of specialized capacity. This assumption fails to account for the distinct technical expertise, institutional infrastructure, and stakeholder relationships that each agency has built over decades. Analysis reveals approximately 20-30% programmatic overlap alongside 60-70% unique mandates per agency, meaning consolidation would affect only a minority of shared work while orphaning the majority of each agency's specialized functions, thereby diluting the mandates of both.

The consequences would be felt most acutely at the national level, where governments, civil society organizations, and millions of women and girls depend on the technical support, operational infrastructure, and normative leadership these agencies provide. The following analysis examines six critical functions that would be lost or significantly weakened in a merger, drawing on evidence from civil society organizations working directly with these agencies across regions.

*"UNFPA works with the National Agency for the Control of AIDS on HIV prevention, the Federal Ministry of Health's Adolescent Health and Reproductive Health Divisions, and the Ministry of Education at the state level for school health programs. UN Women works with the Ministry of Women's Affairs on Beijing advancement and addressing violence against women and girls," explains a Nigerian civil society leader, illustrating how the agencies partner with different government sectors.*



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## UNWomen Potential Loss 1: Gender Mainstreaming and Planning

### What's at Risk?

UN Women holds the system-wide mandate for gender mainstreaming across more than 40 UN entities, ensuring that gender equality and equity are integrated across all sectors of UN work. This role is anchored in the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality (UN-SWAP),<sup>34</sup> through which UN Women holds agencies accountable for integrating gender into policies, programmes, and budgets. This coordination function requires institutional authority and independence. A merged or diluted mandate would compromise UN Women's ability to objectively assess other UN entities while competing for resources and delivering its own operational programmes. Without a clear institutional home, gender mainstreaming risks fragmentation and ultimately becoming no one's responsibility.

## Why Does This Matter?

Gender mainstreaming is especially vulnerable during fiscal constraints and crisis responses, as it does not yield immediate or easily quantifiable results. In an entity focused primarily on operational service delivery, long-term normative leadership and system-wide coordination are likely to be deprioritized. If UN Women's role is weakened, UN-SWAP faces an untenable gap: no other UN entity has the mandate or legitimacy to assume system-wide gender accountability. The result would be a dilution of gender across the UN system at precisely the moment when sustained leadership is most needed to protect equity and prevent backsliding.

*A merger at this moment will definitely impede how we monitor the implementation and realization of the SDGs, specifically 3 and 5," notes a Central African advocate, identifying the accountability gap that would emerge.*

## UNFPA Potential Loss 1: Population Planning Capacity

### What's at Risk?

UNFPA is the only UN agency with a formal mandate on population dynamics, a function that underpins development planning far beyond the health or gender sectors. Population analysis is not solely about women and girls; it is a foundational input for universal development planning across health, education, housing, infrastructure, social protection, labor markets, and climate resilience. UNFPA provides specialized technical leadership in census operations, civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems, population projections, and demographic analysis. These capacities enable governments to generate reliable, disaggregated data and long-term population scenarios essential for evidence-based policymaking. UNFPA's demographic intelligence supports national planning cycles, fiscal projections, and SDG implementation across multiple sectors. This mandate and expertise are highly specialized and institutionalized within UNFPA, and absorbing these functions into a merged entity would risk marginalizing or weakening population work within an institution primarily oriented toward gender equality advocacy, normative leadership, and sector-specific programming.<sup>35</sup>

## Why Does This Matter?

Without a dedicated institutional home for population and planning capacity, the UN system would lose a critical pillar of its ability to support Member States with high-quality demographic data and analysis. Population dynamics shape every major development challenge (aging populations, youth bulges, fertility transitions, urbanization, and climate-induced migration) and directly influence decisions on infrastructure investments, education systems, health workforce planning, social protection, and climate adaptation strategies.<sup>36</sup> These are long-term, technically complex planning functions that require sustained expertise, continuity, and political neutrality.

*"UNFPA works with the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Development, and Office of Planning and Budget on SRHR issues," states a Uruguayan organization, emphasizing UNFPA's cross-sectoral technical support essential for development planning.*

They cannot be effectively absorbed into an entity whose primary mandate and incentives are oriented toward gender equality programming and normative advocacy. Weakening UNFPA's population mandate would therefore undermine the evidence base for national development planning and reduce the UN's credibility as a trusted source of demographic intelligence at a time when data-driven decision-making is more critical than ever.



## UNWomen Potential Loss 2: Gender Normative Standard Development

### What's at Risk?

UN Women has a core mandate to lead global, regional, and national policy and norm-setting on gender equality, women's and girls' rights, and broader equity concerns. This includes supporting gender-responsive laws and policies, advancing international standards, and monitoring implementation of global commitments. Any dilution of this mandate risks weakening UN Women's authority to convene, guide, and hold institutions accountable for gender commitments, treating gender equality as aspirational rather than foundational.

*In Egypt, UN Women's responsibilities are clear: "UN Women partners with the National Council for Women, Ministry of Social Solidarity, and Ministry of Planning on political participation, economic inclusion, and protection from violence," notes an Egyptian advocate.*

### Why Does This Matter?

Policy and norms shape long-term change by determining how power, resources, and rights are distributed. UN Women's leadership ensures that gender equality and equity are embedded in governance frameworks across the UN system and Member States. This work is not only about women and girls; it is about addressing structural inequalities that affect societies as a whole. Weakening UN Women's norm-setting role would undermine accountability and risk reversing progress at a time when gains in gender equality face increasing global pressure.



## UNFPA Potential Loss 2: SRHR Commodities Security and Service Delivery

### What's at Risk?

UNFPA plays a unique and highly specialized role in ensuring access to essential medicines and reproductive health commodities, extending far beyond procurement from the WHO Essential Medicines List. While procurement is a critical function, effective commodity security depends equally, if not more, on sustained technical and operational support across the entire supply chain. This includes demand forecasting and quantification, procurement planning, regulatory support, quality assurance, warehousing, last-mile distribution, logistics management information systems, and capacity building of national supply chain institutions. In many low- and middle-income countries, UNFPA is not simply a supplier of commodities but a core technical partner embedded within national systems. Its teams work directly with ministries of health to anticipate demand, prevent stockouts, manage pipeline risks, and respond rapidly to disruptions caused by funding gaps, emergencies, or global supply shocks. This role is essential to ensuring that commodities move beyond central warehouses and consistently reach service delivery points, health facilities, clinics, and community outlets, without interruption.<sup>37</sup>

*An Egyptian advocate identifies concrete dependencies: "UNFPA provides contraceptive commodities, trains health providers and social workers, and supports family planning programs through the Ministry of Health and Population. If disrupted, millions of women would face contraceptive shortages."*

*A Uruguayan organization specifies what would be lost: "UNFPA provides consulting, advisory services, and protocol development to the Ministry of Health on SRHR issues. They support contraceptive procurement by obtaining better prices. The entire comprehensive sexuality education line in non-formal settings would be weakened. This was key when we had a conservative government that dismissed this agenda."*

## Why Does This Matter?

The stakes are particularly high in the current context of shrinking global health financing and declining bilateral support for reproductive health commodities, especially from the United States. These reductions have already placed significant strain on national supply chains, increasing the risk of stockouts and service disruptions. In this environment, countries are more dependent on UNFPA's technical leadership to bridge financing gaps, optimize limited resources, and maintain continuity of essential services.

*"There'll be a gaping hole if anything happens to those kinds of programs. Because it's not just about funding, it's also technical support," warns a Nigerian civil society leader whose organization partners with UNFPA on reproductive health programming.*



UNFPA's ability to provide hands-on, system-level support is often the difference between commodities sitting unused in warehouses and life-saving medicines reaching women and girls when and where they are needed. Disruptions to UNFPA's technical and operational capacity would have immediate and tangible consequences: interrupted service provision, increased unmet need for family planning and maternal health services, and setbacks in hard-won gains in sexual and reproductive health. Preserving UNFPA's specialized role in commodity security is therefore not only an institutional concern, but a matter of safeguarding uninterrupted access to essential health services at a time of growing global vulnerability.

Furthermore, UNFPA is the UN's lead agency for the comprehensive SRHR agenda established under the Cairo Programme of Action. Beyond commodity security, UNFPA provides technical leadership on adolescent pregnancy prevention, comprehensive sexuality education, safe abortion access, including post-abortion care, and rights-based sexual and reproductive health. Complimenting WHO's role focused on normative standards and guidelines, UNFPA is the primary operational agency working at national and sub-national levels to translate commitments into operational tools, train providers, and embed rights-based approaches into health systems. This institutional architecture for SRHR - spanning sexual health, reproductive health, reproductive rights, and sexual rights - is consolidated within UNFPA. Weakening or fragmenting this mandate would leave the comprehensive SRHR agenda without a clear institutional home at a time when political opposition to these rights is intensifying globally.



## UNWomen Potential Loss 3: Support and Coordination with Feminist and Women's Rights Movements

### What's at Risk?

UN Women plays a unique role in providing technical, financial, and coordination support to feminist and women's rights organizations. These movements were instrumental in establishing UN Women as a standalone agency, recognizing the need for an independent institutional champion for gender equality. UN Women remains one of the few multilateral actors that directly funds feminist and women's movements, particularly through unique mechanisms such as the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women. Beyond funding, it provides convening power, legitimacy, and

*An Egyptian representative raises institutional concerns: "Both agencies work mainly with governmental entities and GONGOs. Most support flows through government channels, which are often inefficient and lack accountability. If a merger disrupts operations, grassroots NGOs already excluded from funding will have no alternative resources to sustain community-level interventions."*

access to policy spaces, especially critical in contexts of shrinking civic space.<sup>38</sup> Structural changes that weaken UN Women's mandate or funding mechanisms risk cutting off a vital source of support for these movements and eroding hard-won partnerships.

### Why Does This Matter?

Feminist and women's rights organizations are central to advancing accountability, innovation, and social change, yet they remain among the most underfunded actors in the development system. UN Women's support often reaches grassroots and marginalized groups that are otherwise excluded from traditional funding channels. Its multistakeholder convening role ensures that civil society voices, particularly from the Global South, are heard in global policy processes and that commitments made at international forums translate into national-level action. Undermining this role would weaken the ecosystem that has driven progress on gender equality and women's rights for decades, disconnecting global commitments from the movements that make them real on the ground.

## UNFPA Potential Loss #3: Humanitarian Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRHR) Architecture

### What's at Risk?

UNFPA is the technical lead for sexual and reproductive health in humanitarian settings, coordinating the delivery of the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) during emergencies, providing pre-positioned reproductive health supplies, and leading gender-based violence (GBV) response within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) framework.<sup>39</sup> In 2024 alone, UNFPA reached 10 million people in 59 crisis-affected countries with life-saving SRH services.<sup>40</sup> This work relies on highly specialized operational infrastructure, including logistics systems, pre-positioned commodities, rapid deployment capacity, and technical expertise in crisis response.<sup>41</sup> These functions are complex and require dedicated institutional focus to maintain readiness and effectiveness.

### Why Does This Matter?

For displaced women, girls, and other vulnerable populations in conflict and disaster-affected contexts, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services is a leading cause of preventable death. UNFPA's infrastructure, pre-positioned commodities, supply chains, emergency coordination mechanisms, and field-deployed technical teams is essential to ensuring continuity of services in volatile environments. Without sustained institutional capacity and mandate, humanitarian SRHR would risk becoming an orphaned function, jeopardizing service delivery at a critical moment when lives are on the line. UNFPA's specialized expertise and operational readiness are indispensable for delivering sexual and reproductive health services and GBV support to populations most in need.

*"There'll be a gaping hole if anything happens to those kinds of programs. Because it's not just about funding, it's also technical support," warns a Nigerian civil society leader whose organization partners with UNFPA on reproductive health programming.*

# THE PATH FORWARD: REJECTING A FLAWED MERGER AND REFOCUSING UN80 REFORM

## **Understanding the Decision-Making Process**

The process for this merger proposal follows a clear institutional pathway: The Secretary-General launched the UN80 Initiative in which the merger of UNFPA-UN Women was proposed as part of Workstream 3. A Task Force led by Guy Ryder has been conducting an assessment of this proposal. The assessment report will be ready on January 27, 2026 and by February will be presented to the Executive Boards of UNFPA and UN Women. The SG will then receive the final assessment along with the Boards' positions. Following this, the SG will determine the process for presenting the proposal to Member States.

## **The Secretary-General proposes; Member States decide.**

Critically, the final decision rests entirely with Member States. No merger can proceed without Member State approval. This means Member States have full authority to reject proposals that would weaken mandates, dilute institutional capacity, or undermine commitments made at Cairo and Beijing. Guy Ryder stated explicitly in his December 15, 2025 briefing that the Secretary-General will not advance a merger if it would weaken existing mandates.

Member States must hold him to that commitment and exercise their authority to reject this proposal.

## Why This Merger Must Be Rejected

As per the above analysis, the merger as currently designed would fundamentally weaken both SRHR and gender equality infrastructure. Despite assurances that mandate dilution is "off the table," the merger would, in practice, dismantle specialized institutional capacity, fragment financing, and erode the infrastructure underpinning delivery of Cairo and Beijing commitments. Population dynamics capacity would be orphaned, the humanitarian SRHR architecture serving 10 million people across 59 crisis-affected countries would be disrupted, system-wide gender coordination would be compromised, contraceptive security systems supporting 46 countries would be interrupted, and feminist movement support would be cut off at a moment of shrinking civic space globally.

Improving efficiency, strengthening coordination, and delivering better results across the UN system are legitimate and necessary objectives. However, the current process is fundamentally flawed. Rather than beginning with an evidence-based assessment of what is not working, it advances a predetermined structural solution - the merger - without first diagnosing the underlying problems. Reform that does not lead with curiosity, evidence, and problem definition risks producing outcomes misaligned with operational realities and political commitments.

Taken together, these design choices point to a clear conclusion: this is not a fit-for-purpose reform exercise. It risks weakening gender equality and SRHR mandates amid intensifying political rollback. The question before Member States should therefore not be whether to merge, but how to address inefficiencies, coordination gaps, and financing constraints without weakening mandates already under sustained political attack.

# WHAT CIVIL SOCIETY CAN DO: ADVOCACY PRIORITIES TO PROTECT MANDATES

Civil society organizations, women's rights movements, SRHR advocates, and humanitarian actors have a critical role to play in shaping Member State positions on this proposal. We call on civil society to take the following advocacy actions:

## 1. Call on Your Government to Reject the Proposed Merger

Engage with your national delegation to the UN, including representatives to the UNFPA and UN Women Executive Boards. Share evidence from your work showing how UNFPA and UN Women's distinct mandates and specialized expertise are essential to service delivery, rights protection, and community-level impact.

## 2. Push for System-Wide, Not Selective, Mandate Review

Encourage your government to support a credible, system-wide review that assesses where duplication genuinely exists versus where overlap reflects complementary entry points. Question why UNFPA and UN Women - both operating in politically contested spaces - were singled out for consolidation.

## 3. Demand Meaningful Inclusion of Civil Society and National Actors

Call for civil society to be engaged throughout the reform process, not just briefed at the end. Meaningful participation should include consultation with national Ministries, regional entities, implementing partners, and communities affected by these agencies' work.

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# Our Mission

**Fòs Feminista fights for universal access to reproductive health care, including abortion, and for comprehensive sex education. With feminist partners worldwide, we work so the most marginalized women, girls, and gender-diverse people can claim their rights and achieve justice.**

