Evidence and lessons on types of UN Women support
A meta-synthesis of UN Women evaluations

Photo: UN Women/Second Chance Education and Vocational Learning Programme

The aim of this meta-synthesis is to collate insights and evidence on the key types of support provided by UN Women during the Strategic Plan period (2018–2021) from corporate and decentralized evaluations. UN Women's operational activities involving partnerships entail several types of support in line with the Entity's comparative advantage: normative support; United Nations coordination for gender equality and women's empowerment; integrated policy advice; capacity development; advocacy and social mobilization; and technical assistance for essential services.

UN Women's new Strategic Plan (2022–2025) aims to guide the Entity for the next four years – with an eye towards the 2030 deadline to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This meta-synthesis focuses on types of UN Women support that have not been covered in recent syntheses and evaluations, and that are highlighted in the new Strategic Plan: normative support; integrated policy advice and thought leadership; capacity development and technical assistance; and advocacy and social mobilization. Based on the evaluations analysed, it outlines key insights, good practices and impediments in the types of support UN Women provides, with a geographic and thematic focus.

The meta-synthesis contributes to UN Women's organizational knowledge base and the primary audience for the synthesis is UN Women stakeholders, including the Executive Board and UN Women personnel. The analysis includes a forward-looking aspect and makes links with the proposed key approaches in the new Strategic Plan.

Limitations

As with any meta-synthesis, the analysis and findings in this report are limited to the level and depth of insights provided in the evaluation sample. Certain types of support were covered more comprehensively in evaluations than others, and the insights in these areas are richer and more nuanced. For instance, capacity development efforts were highlighted in all 67 evaluations, while policy advice was mentioned in 40 evaluations. To the extent possible, the analysis takes this caveat into account when mapping the evidence.

Due to the geographic variation of the evaluation sample, some regions are covered to a greater degree. To mitigate this issue, the report is careful in ensuring that illustrative highlights are drawn in a geographically representative manner.

The key objectives of the meta-synthesis are to:

1. Synthesize evidence on implementation/results of key types of UN Women support.

2. Summarize trends, emerging themes and common lessons.

3. Identify enabling factors (internal and external) and good practices.

4. Identify risks and challenges.

5. Highlight innovative approaches in providing key types of support.

Scope and methodology of meta-synthesis

67 evaluations

33 Programme/Project evaluations

13 Country Portfolio evaluations

7 Corporate evaluations

5 Joint Evaluations

9 Other types (Thematic, country-led and global evaluations)

Theory-based and forward-looking approach

Combination of qualitative and quantitative methods

NVIVO software was used to systematically map and analyse the body of existing evaluative evidence

Key insights

NORMATIVE SUPPORT

Evaluations related to normative support indicated several instances of UN Women working to strengthen national and legal frameworks, contributing to the creation of laws and policies to protect women's rights, and supporting mechanisms for gender mainstreaming. Evaluations noted that UN Women provided successful technical and advocacy support to the adoption of laws intended to raise women's representation in governance. By convening and supporting the representation of government stakeholders at international forums, UN Women has worked to support enhanced compliance with global normative frameworks in alignment with the SDGs. UN Women effectively leveraged platforms such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) to foster dialogue between governments and women's organizations.

Key to all these efforts was ensuring and enhancing the inclusion of women's organizations in intergovernmental negotiations; supporting governments to establish gender units; and providing gender focal points for governments. UN Women's work with governments and women's organizations in support of implementation of CEDAW was also highlighted in evaluations spanning several geographic areas.

A number of good practices were highlighted in evaluations, given the breadth of UN Women's normative support. One of the key practices was fostering long-term alliances and mutually beneficial country-level partnerships with various government departments, non-state actors and civil society organizations (CSOs). Another important factor was alignment with national and international priorities. A related good practice was in fostering national ownership and national champions to ensure sustainability.

One of the main impediments to effective normative support was the need for long-term engagement with multiple layers of government to support normative frameworks. Engaging with governments is complicated and UN Women needs to ensure that it engages not just key ministries, but various levels of government. A related impediment was insufficient support to implementation of normative frameworks and gender-responsive policies. Some of the factors influencing this were outside the direct control of UN Women, such as discriminatory social norms; political challenges or instability; and, most often, a lack of budget and plans for implementation. Implementation was also hindered by the lack of gender data and monitoring systems. Several evaluations pointed to inadequate monitoring and evaluation in this area, with low resource allocation the key constraint. Other internal impediments identified in a few evaluations included inadequate needs assessments and lack of coherence. UN Women could also improve its internal learning systems and build its own capacity around risk management related to political transitions.

Good practices

- Fostering long term alliances and mutually beneficial country-level partnerships
- Alignment with national and international priorities
- Fostering national ownership and national champions in order to ensure sustainability

Impediments

- Need for long-term engagement with multiple layers of government
- Insufficient support to implementation of normative frameworks

INTEGRATED POLICY ADVICE

Most evaluations covering UN Women's support to policy advice demonstrated results related to national and local laws and reforms. UN Women provided a range of technical support, advocacy and capacity building while working with CSOs and governments to ensure the inclusion of varied stakeholders into law making. UN Women also supported policy advice through the production of policy-relevant research. UN Women supported governments in strengthening the production and use of gender statistics, particularly those related to the measurement of progress towards achievement of the SDGs and implementation of gender equality objectives in the SDGs.

Alignment with the local context and good timing standout as good practices highlighted in evaluations. These were a result of consultation with multiple stakeholders and the establishment of collaborative spaces. Another good practice was the production of highly relevant research, which facilitated conversations and advocacy around policy issues.

Research that is timely and aligns well with key issues can help mainstream gender-sensitive processes.

The most commonly cited impediment to successful policy advice was inadequate implementation support. The path from enactment to implementation requires substantial resources in terms of time, effort and finances. Evaluations related to policy implementation overwhelmingly identified weak political will and the lack of adequate financing as issues.

Good practices

- Alignment with the local context and good timing
- Production of highly relevant research to facilitate conversations and advocacy around policy issues

Impediments

- Inadequate implementation support
- Weak political will and lack of adequate financing

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

As highlighted in several evaluations, capacity building in the form of strengthening national capacities is a key activity for UN Women. UN Women supported capacity development of national institutions and CSOs in a wide range of areas such as results-based management, monitoring and evaluation, gender statistics, gender-responsive governance and gender-responsive laws and policies. UN Women adapted these efforts based on the needs of the country by tailoring activities and facilitating exchange with other governments through international forums and convening.

UN Women also worked to strengthen the capacities of CSOs. Longer-term commitments on capacity building activities were less common, but have been highlighted as areas for further work. Evaluations also highlighted UN Women's technical support in developing tools related to ending violence against women. UN Women provided support through training in all four key thematic areas. In many cases, the training involved a training-of-trainers model to foster sustainability.

Building institutional capacity and strengthening existing mechanisms were two frequently cited good practices. Evaluations that reported a high likelihood of sustainability of results highlighted capacity building of institutions as a good practice. Another commonly highlighted good practice was the provision of comprehensive support packages and holistic approaches. Baseline surveys and participatory needs assessments prior to training and capacity development were also highlighted as good practices, particularly to ensure the inclusion of marginalized groups.

The most commonly cited impediment to achieving impact was the short-term nature of interventions. Changes in social norms are slow and typically go beyond limited project time frames.

Stakeholders also noted that continued technical support is needed in areas such as gender budgeting and refresher orientations are required to ensure impact. Continuous capacity building and a comprehensive plan for sustainability were missing in many programmes. Another impediment was the lack of results tracking and post training follow-up. Capacity development and training activities included output-level indicators, measuring the number of stakeholders reached and number of training courses conducted, but there was little follow-up to assess changes in outcomes or impact. Lack of follow-up data also hinders learning about which strategies are truly effective, and which components are the most important in terms of maximizing the well-being of intended beneficiaries.

Training also needs to be relevant to stakeholders and based on comprehensive needs assessments. Target beneficiaries should be consulted on training needs: in a few evaluations, stakeholders indicated that the content of training was too general, not tailored to the local context, or not offered in their preferred language. Finally, some evaluations highlighted administrative challenges due to government/implementing partner or UN Women procedures leading to delays in implementation.

Good practices

- Building institutional capacity and strengthening existing mechanisms
- Provision of comprehensive support packages and holistic approaches
- Baseline surveys and participatory needs assessments to ensure inclusion of marginalized groups

Impediments

- Short-term nature of interventions
- Lack of results tracking and post training follow-up frameworks

ADVOCACY AND SOCIAL MOBILIZATION

Several evaluations found that UN Women-supported awareness raising campaigns were successful in engaging women. While these insights are not applied to all campaigns, some instances of campaigns providing a platform and allowing communities to engage in discussions around social norms were reported. UN Women supported building alliances across different areas of work, including the engagement of men and boys for gender equality.

UN Women's work with the media, including social media, was highlighted in several evaluations, including increasing the capacities of journalists and journalism students to improve the quality of reporting on gender equality issues.

Given UN Women's wide ranging advocacy work, a number of good practices were highlighted in evaluations. One of the most frequently cited was UN Women's ability to successfully build and mobilize diverse alliances. Another area where UN Women was strong was its capacity to establish political dialogue with key actors to whom Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or CSOs may not have access. UN Women promoted the link between different institutional actors at central and local levels, CSOs and academia. A related good practice was engaging influential partners as champions.

UN Women's reputation and track record on advocacy were also enabling factors. UN Women personnel are known to be active advocates and are well placed to mobilize public and private actors and through communication efforts. The Entity facilitated discussion on sensitive and contested issues and brought together a range of stakeholders due to its neutral role.

A key impediment to successful advocacy was the limited reach of campaigns in terms of engaging the most marginalized groups and reaching out to diverse allies. Evaluations consistently highlighted the need to work with diverse alliances to bring about change in power hierarchies in gender relations. A related impediment was the somewhat limited duration of engagements. Long-term and multi-level engagements are needed for transformative changes in deeply entrenched attitudes and behaviours, and to overcome cultural barriers. Several evaluations highlighted stakeholders calling for longer engagements by UN Women, particularly in advocacy.

Another key area with room for improvement is the tracking of results. This is particularly important as advocacy is seen as UN Women's strength spanning all thematic areas and the Entity should work towards going beyond simply monitoring inputs and outputs.

Good practices

- Engaging influential partners as champions, building and mobilizing alliances
- Establishing political dialogue with key actors to whom NGOs or CSOs may not have access
- Being active advocates and mobilizing public and private actors and through communication efforts

Impediments

- Limited reach and duration of campaigns in terms of reaching the most marginalized/ vulnerable
- Need for improvement in tracking results/changes in outcomes post advocacy

Opportunities and way forward

- Complement normative support with enhanced support to **implementation of norms and standards** to protect women's rights

- Enhance measurement of impact and **results tracking** beyond inputs and outputs, particularly in areas of large investment and effort

- Focus on **key strategic areas** and work with partners to provide long-term support and build in sustainability measures

- Develop **holistic approaches** with multi-level engagements involving a combination of advocacy, capacity building, training and normative support

- Enhance the use of **gender data**, research and standardized needs assessments