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## United Nations Children's Fund

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Item 11 of the provisional agenda\*

## Evaluation of the UNICEF Gender Policy and Gender Action Plans

### Summary\*\*

#### *Summary*

Gender equality remains a central focus of international development. Despite progress since the 1995 Beijing Declaration, no country is fully on track to achieve all gender equality targets under Sustainable Development Goal 5. Sustainable, long-term change requires leadership and commitment from Governments, supported by organizations of all sizes – from grass-roots women's rights groups to United Nations agencies. As one of the largest United Nations agencies, UNICEF plays a pivotal role in advancing gender equality, emphasizing children's rights through the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Through its wide footprint, the organization contributes by supporting adolescent girls, fostering diverse partnerships, strengthening service systems, and working to change social norms, making it well positioned to help realize Sustainable Development Goal 5 and other gender-related global targets.

The vision of UNICEF for gender quality centres on continuous learning to adapt and improve its strategies to advance the rights of girls and women. In this spirit, the UNICEF Evaluation Office commissioned an independent evaluation in 2023 to assess the progress made by the organization through its Gender Policy (2021–2030) and two subsequent Gender Action Plans covering the period from 2018 to 2023. The evaluation sought to meet UNICEF learning and accountability needs by tracking progress and identifying areas for growth in gender equality efforts, with a view to inform the next Gender Action Plan and its integration into the upcoming UNICEF Strategic Plan (2026–2029). The evaluation also had a broader objective to deepen gender equality integration across the humanitarian, development and peace contexts in which UNICEF operates.

\* [E/ICEF/2025/1](#).

\*\* The evaluation report summary is being circulated in all official languages. The full report is available in English from the UNICEF Evaluation Office website (see annex).

*Note:* The present document was processed in its entirety by UNICEF.



The evaluation found that UNICEF is making significant strides in gender equality, driven by the third Gender Action Plan (2022–2025) and the Gender Policy. Building on this progress, a new Gender Action Plan should address institutional challenges by reinforcing accountability for gender across all levels of the organization, deepening programming and partnerships, and enhancing expenditures for gender-related outcomes. While the UNICEF gender-focused vision is championed by dedicated staff, clarity on integrating gender across roles remains crucial to ensuring that “gender is everyone’s responsibility”. Setting gender-transformative results consistently and ensuring equitable workplace practices are key growth areas. UNICEF has also become a better workplace for women, thanks to efforts addressing gender imbalances, as well as the increasing presence of “gender activists” in the organization. However, measures to ensure parity are not always applied consistently, and more can be done to support women’s well-being in the workplace. The evaluation offers four major recommendations that UNICEF should consider in efforts to make meaningful strides towards its vision for gender equality and empowerment for all children, adolescents and women worldwide.

Elements of a draft decision for consideration by the Executive Board are provided in section VI.

# I. Introduction

## A. What is the context of this evaluation?

1. Gender equality remains a central priority within the international development agenda. Despite significant progress since the adoption of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – a landmark document for gender equality and women’s rights – no country is fully on track to achieve all of the targets under Sustainable Development Goal 5, which focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Advancing gender equality requires committed leadership from national and local governments, supported by organizations of all sizes – from grass-roots women’s rights organizations to major United Nations entities. As one of the largest organizations within the United Nations system, UNICEF plays a pivotal role in advancing this agenda.

2. The organization’s efforts to promote gender equality are anchored in key international frameworks, including the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The 1986 Declaration on the Right to Development and the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women also provide a foundation for UNICEF work in this area. In humanitarian contexts, UNICEF is guided by the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, revised in 2020, which emphasize gender equality across all humanitarian actions.

3. As part of the UN System-wide Action Plan (UN-SWAP) on gender equality and the empowerment of women, UNICEF annually reports on 17 shared performance indicators. In its efforts to advance Sustainable Development Goal 5, UNICEF places particular focus on target 5.1, which aims to eradicate all forms of discrimination against women and girls, and target 5.2, which seeks to end all forms of violence and exploitation affecting them.

4. Gender equality has been a cross-cutting priority in the UNICEF Strategic Plans since 2006 and is further reinforced in the 2010 Policy on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Girls and Women. The first Gender Action Plan (2014–2017), was aligned with the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2014–2017, and adopted a dual-track approach of mainstreaming and targeted priorities. It aimed to integrate gender equality into UNICEF systems through capacity-building, system-strengthening, resource allocation and partnerships, emphasizing programming to improve the well-being of adolescent girls.

5. The second (2018–2021)<sup>1</sup> and third (2022–2025)<sup>2</sup> Gender Action Plans followed, building on the 2019 evaluation recommendations.<sup>3</sup> This led to the current Gender Policy, 2021–2030, marking a more ambitious vision for gender equality and empowerment of all children, adolescents and women. The Policy commits UNICEF to addressing structural barriers, such as harmful social norms and power imbalances, that perpetuate inequalities. It acknowledges gender diversity, seeks to uplift adolescent girls’ rights, and aims to strengthen partnerships with women’s and girls’ rights organizations by 2030.

6. Gender equality remains central to UNICEF work, serving as a core principle, cross-cutting programme and change strategy through gender-transformative programming within the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025. Despite these efforts, progress for women, girls and children has been slower than anticipated. Since 2019,

<sup>1</sup> E/ICEF/2017/16.

<sup>2</sup> E/ICEF/2021/31.

<sup>3</sup> E/ICEF/2020/14.

challenges have intensified, particularly due to the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on women and girls. Simultaneously, a global resurgence of restrictive policies threatens women's rights, further complicating efforts towards transformative change – a challenge faced by many international organizations. Women and girls are also the most affected by climate change, which exacerbates existing inequalities and poses new threats to their livelihoods, health and safety. At the same time, increased evidence on tackling gender norms and a growing consensus on the need for gender-transformative approaches have provided valuable momentum. Collaborations with organizations led by women, girls and youth are essential for achieving sustainable structural changes. In this context, the United Nations has reaffirmed the urgency of advancing gender equality through the Decade of Action for the 2030 Agenda, with the ongoing United Nations reform supporting this renewed commitment.

7. This evaluation of the UNICEF Gender Policy and Gender Action Plans is framed against this backdrop. It is one of the institutional effectiveness evaluations outlined in the UNICEF plan for global evaluations, 2022–2025, which was endorsed by the Executive Board in 2021.<sup>4</sup> It builds on previous evaluations of the Gender Policy and the Gender Action Plans, while putting more focus on programmatic results for children, adolescents and women on gender equality. The evaluation, conducted from November 2023 to October 2024, draws on extensive data collected at all levels of the organization, including primary programmatic data from eight countries<sup>5</sup> across the seven regions where UNICEF operates. It was independently managed by the Evaluation Office, adhering to the United Nations Evaluation Group Norms and Standards. It was conducted in close collaboration with key internal and external stakeholders, who were continuously engaged and provided with emerging evidence to ensure the integration of its recommendations into the design of the new Gender Action Plan and Strategic Plan (2026–2029).

8. The findings are grounded in a robust evidence base and offer major recommendations to transform UNICEF programming, ensuring sustained commitments to gender equality and driving transformational change for women and girls.

9. The primary users of the evaluation included management and employees across all levels of the organization who are involved in the implementation of the Gender Policy and Gender Action Plan, and in particular, the Programme Group and the newly created Division of People and Culture. Other users include the Executive Board, other United Nations agencies, Governments, donors, partner organizations within and outside the United Nations, women- and girl-led organizations, and young people.

## **B. Why was the evaluation conducted, and what does it cover?**

10. This is an evaluation of institutional effectiveness, covering UNICEF work at the global, regional and country levels. Its primary purpose was to assess how effectively UNICEF has integrated gender equality concerns within its normative guidance frameworks, institutional practices and programmes, particularly considering the new Gender Policy and the second and third Gender Action Plans. Using an appreciative enquiry – an approach to assess organizational change that focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses – the evaluation served as an opportunity

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, Compendium of decisions adopted by the Executive Board at its first regular session of 2022, [E/ICEF/2022/8](#), pp. 3–4.

<sup>5</sup> The countries included in primary data collection were Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Fiji (within the Pacific Multi-County Office), Mozambique, Myanmar and Peru.

to highlight good practices and lessons learned to strengthen UNICEF gender work moving forward.

11. The evaluation had three main objectives:

(a) Assess the relevance and coherence of the current Gender Policy and the third Gender Action Plan in advancing gender equality and the empowerment of adolescent girls, with a focus on the UNICEF mandate (Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action) and commitments to the UN-SWAP.

(b) Evaluate the coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability in implementing gender-related changes and performance enablers within UNICEF policies, practices, systems, programming and accountability mechanisms through the Gender Action Plans.

(c) Measure programmatic results for children, adolescents and women on gender equality across the five Goal Areas outlined in the UNICEF Strategic Plan, in both development and humanitarian contexts across the second and third Gender Action Plans.

12. The evaluation examined the implementation of the Gender Policy and Gender Action Plans from 2018 to 2023, focusing on the performance and results of UNICEF support for gender equality within the triple nexus (development, humanitarian and peace). It builds on the previous evaluations, analysing the second and third Gender Action Plans and the 2021 Gender Policy in greater depth. It also reviewed the UN-SWAP influence on gender representation and capacity-building within UNICEF, examining staff roles, management and gender architecture to identify possible areas for further strengthening.

13. The evaluation covered three main topics:

(a) **Gender Policy and Gender Action Plan conceptual framework:** This component analysed the current Gender Policy, the conceptual framework of the third Gender Action Plan, and the theory of change, focusing on how they are applied across regions to address evolving gender dynamics, particularly concerning gender and social norms. The evaluation also assessed the strategic integration of gender within the UNICEF Strategic Plan, both as a cross-cutting programme and as a change strategy, while drawing comparisons with the gender strategies and action plans of similar organizations like the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), or partner agencies such as Global Affairs Canada.

(b) **Gender-related organizational changes and performance enablers:** This component examined how well UNICEF policies, practices and systems support progress towards gender equality. It assessed the implementation of the Gender Action Plans, covering aspects such as programming processes, monitoring systems, financial resources, leadership and accountability at the global, regional and country levels. Additionally, the component looked at how UNICEF fosters and leverages partnerships with Governments, feminist organizations and networks led by women, girls and young people, amplifying their voices as change agents in programming and advocacy. It also assessed efforts to integrate a gender perspective within national systems and structures, as well as the extent to which UNICEF gender-related initiatives are adopted by partners. Finally, UNICEF institutional enablers for gender equality were compared with those of other United Nations organizations to identify good practices and areas for further improvement.

(c) **Programmatic results and integration of gender equality across programmes:** This component reviewed implemented programmes and assessed progress on outputs and contributions to programmatic outcomes as defined in the

second and third Gender Action Plans, using an analysis of primary data in eight countries and secondary data across the organization. It specifically examined how well UNICEF has integrated gender equality across its Strategic Plan's five Goal Areas, assessing adolescent girls' outcomes and exploring progress in shifting social norms. In addition, the evaluation considered how gender equality has been integrated within the humanitarian, development and peace nexus agenda. The evaluation did not measure direct attribution but instead focused on the broader contribution of UNICEF to the outcome- and impact-level results.

14. The evaluation covered the evaluation criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability and had three main evaluation questions informing the analysis, notably:

(a) To what extent are the current Gender Policy and the third Gender Action Plan conceptual framework well-designed, relevant and coherent to respond to the various needs of all children, adolescents and women, national government priorities, the UNICEF normative framework (i.e. Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention on Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Core Commitments for Children) and the organization's commitments to the UN-SWAP on gender equality?

(b) How well are the gender-related organizational changes and performance enablers of the Gender Action Plans implemented across UNICEF policies, practices, systems, organizational commitments and accountability mechanisms at all levels?

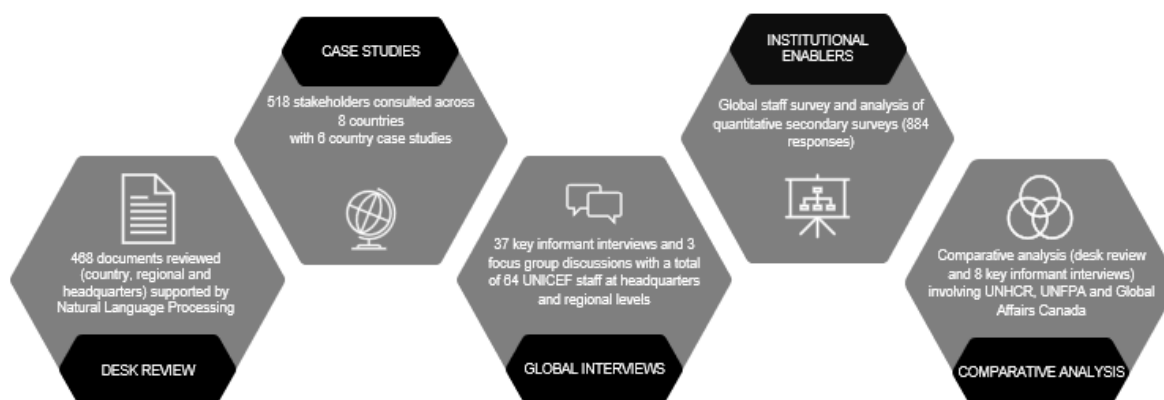
(c) To what extent have UNICEF programmatic results for gender equality throughout the life course been met across all five Goal Areas, particularly to advance adolescent girls' leadership and well-being, in both development and humanitarian settings?

## **II. Methodology**

### **A. How was the evaluation conducted?**

15. Led according to relevant UNICEF and United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards, the evaluation combined a mixed-methods, theory-based approach, emphasizing participation in developing a theory of change for integrating gender equality in UNICEF work. The evaluation involved a thorough review of secondary evidence, analysing 468 documents both manually and through natural language processing. It included six country case studies, supplemented with additional data from two other countries, covering a total of eight countries across UNICEF seven regions. It engaged a diverse group of 518 internal and external informants. Countries identified as case study opportunities were selected using an appreciative inquiry approach, which focuses on strengths, identifying examples of country offices that have created institutional changes in gender-focused work, or countries that have strong gender-transformative practices and results. To complement the appreciative inquiry approach, the evaluation team conducted remote data collection with two countries that did not meet the country case study selection criteria. In addition, 64 key informant interviews and focus group discussions were conducted at the regional and global levels. An all-staff survey gathered 884 responses out of a total of 17,656 staff (with a 99 per cent confidence level, giving a high degree of confidence in the survey results), and a comparative analysis examined how other organizations (i.e. UNHCR, UNFPA and Global Affairs Canada) integrate gender into their work. To analyse the data, the evaluation team used a coding matrix to structure data for both primary and secondary sources, ensuring thorough triangulation of findings to address the evaluation questions and test assumptions in the theory of change. Figure I below summarizes the evaluation methods and data sources.

Figure I  
Illustration of evaluation methods and data sources



Source: Evaluation report.

## B. Limitations and mitigation measures

16. The evaluation faced several limitations, with mitigation measures applied where feasible. Key challenges included the limited availability of baseline data and impact evaluations of programmes. Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to address this, enabling the evaluation to gather diverse evidence. This evidence, once triangulated, provided an indicative picture of the programme made by UNICEF. The evaluation team also had varying levels of access to UNICEF specialists from different programmatic and cross-cutting areas. To address this, the evaluation incorporated a wide range of qualitative and quantitative data from different levels within and outside the organization, giving a comprehensive view of progress in each Goal Area. At the country level, challenges included the availability, and occasionally the relevance, of informants, as well as the security situation in some locations. Despite these obstacles, the evaluation team adapted its methods, ensuring participation from all intended stakeholder groups and exceeding the targeted numbers. While there were also difficulties in analysing the Gender Action Plan Standard Index data (which combines several Plan indicators for institutional enablers, and programmatic indicators) due to changes in frameworks over time, these were managed to ensure meaningful analysis. Altogether, the strong participation of key stakeholders and documentation made available by UNICEF meant that the evaluation findings were informed by a solid evidence base.

## III. Findings

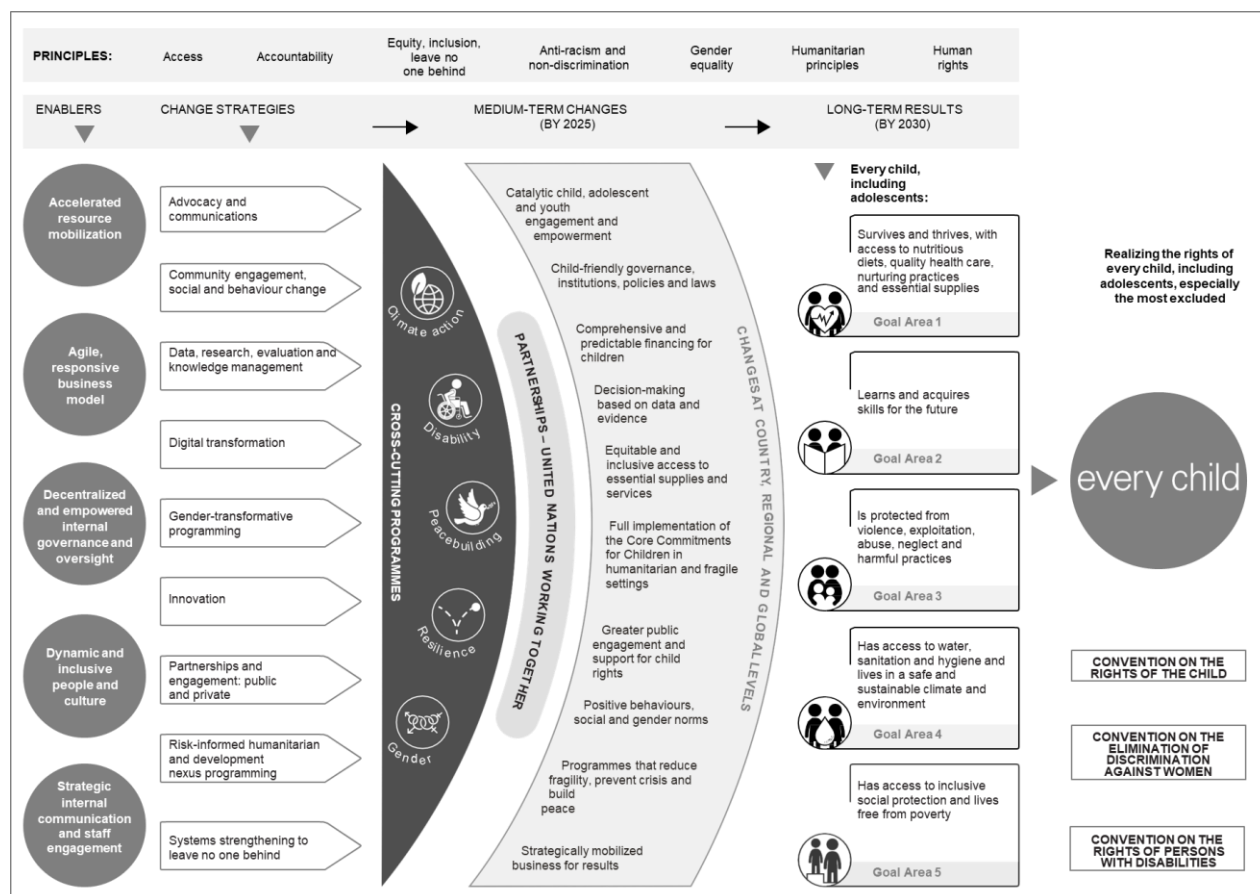
### A. Gender Policy and Gender Action Plan conceptual framework

17. **The Gender Policy and the Gender Action Plan are informed by a wide range of evidence and were relevant to the context at the time they were designed; however, the gender realities of 2024 are different and require UNICEF to step up efforts to promote gender equality.** At the time of the “polycrisis”, the slow progress on Sustainable Development Goal 5 and the rise in anti-gender ideologies have exacerbated existing challenges and brought new ones to the surface that are not adequately addressed in the existing documents.

18. In addition, while the Gender Action Plan is anchored in the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, which gives traction to the gender agenda, there is still “competition for bandwidth” between the various change strategies and cross-cutting themes and insufficient consideration for, and articulation of, intersectionality. As presented in figure II, gender features as a change strategy, a cross-cutting programme (with climate action, disability, peacebuilding, resilience), as a medium-term change (positive behaviours, social and gender norms) and as a principle.

Figure II

**Gender as a critical element in the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025: renewed ambition towards 2030**



Source: UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025.

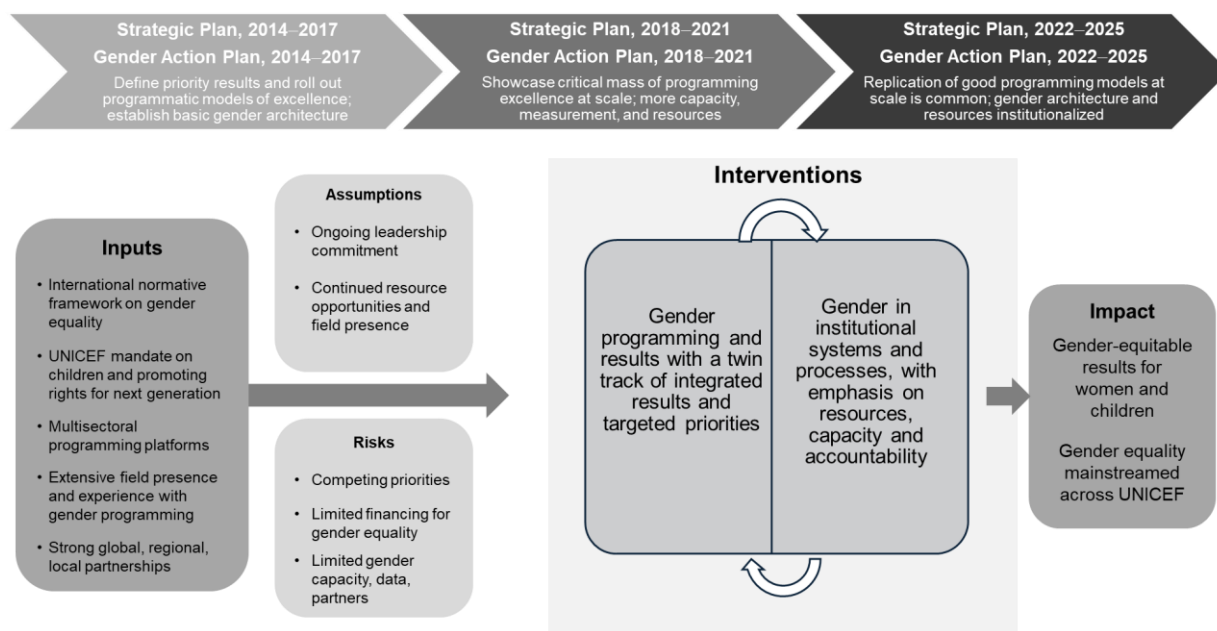
19. Key informants also reported challenges in operationalizing intersectionality, which seems to be common in other organizations, including those involved in the comparative analysis conducted as part of this evaluation. Intersectionality is inadvertently understood as adding a series of divisible “lenses” (e.g. gender, age, disability, among others) to a programme, rather than addressing the intersectional needs of some children and young people, which has consequences on how data are disaggregated, gender analysis is undertaken, or how programmes are delivered.

20. UNICEF Gender Policy sets a long-term vision for gender equality, to which the Gender Action Plan theory of change (see figure III) broadly aligns, but the UNICEF mandate on gender equality is not consistently presented across the different normative guidance. This contributes to different understandings of gender equality and how women’s rights contribute to children’s rights. In addition, the UNICEF comparative advantage within the United Nations system on gender equality



is not sufficiently well articulated in any of the documents, although this was a recommendation of the previous evaluation. This constitutes a barrier to gender-transformative results, which requires joint and concerted efforts between the United Nations and other organizations.

Figure III  
**Gender Action Plan theory of change**



Source: Gender Action Plan, 2022–2025.

21. Further, while the Gender Action Plan is designed to support the operationalization of the Gender Policy, it does not establish sufficient accountabilities and implementation procedures to ensure that it is consistently operationalized.

22. The Gender Action Plan is closely aligned with the UN-SWAP, the accountability framework that assesses performance across United Nations organizations in areas such as gender, results-based management, oversight, accountability, human and financial resources, capacity-building, and knowledge generation and communications. This alignment enhances the prioritization and strategic positioning of the Gender Action Plan within UNICEF. The annual UN-SWAP assessments show that UNICEF has made consistent progress in implementing these institutional enablers, both year-on-year and relative to other United Nations agencies, reinforcing the organization's commitment to advancing the gender agenda.

23. While humanitarian action is addressed in the Gender Action Plan, there could also be more significant contextualization and consideration of working in humanitarian contexts, including a stronger cross-referencing with the Core Commitments for Children and sectoral policies.

## **B. Gender-related organizational changes and performance enablers**

24. During the second and third Gender Action Plans, UNICEF made significant progress in strengthening gender-related organizational changes and performance enablers at all levels. These institutional enablers serve as the foundation for integrating gender into UNICEF efforts, supporting the achievement of Gender Action Plan results across both programmatic and workplace aspects of

gender equality. The framework for these enablers is organized around the key dimensions of “how” and “who”, as illustrated in figure IV.

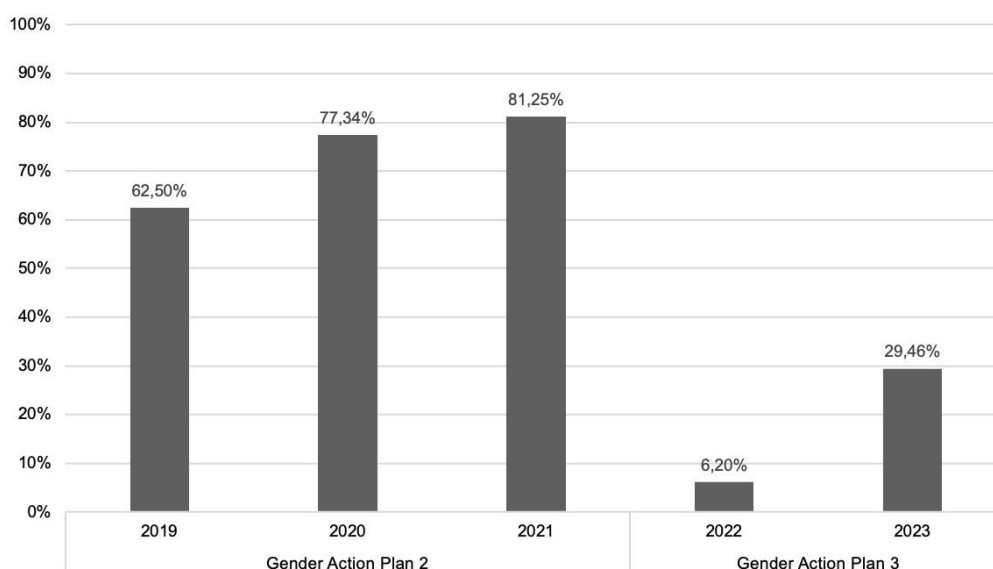
Figure IV  
**Institutional enablers**



Source: Gender Action Plan, 2022–2025.

25. **UNICEF is one of the leading performers within the United Nations system in implementing institutional enablers for gender equality**, consistently ranking among the highest-scoring agencies in the UN-SWAP. In 2023, UNICEF “met” or “exceeded” benchmarks on 16 of 17 indicators (94 per cent) and “approached requirements” on one indicator (6 per cent), achieving its highest overall compliance rate. According to the UN-SWAP assessment and UNICEF internal monitoring systems, the organization has steadily progressed in this area throughout the evaluation period. Gender Action Plan Standard Index data indicates overall progress in implementing institutional enablers despite a notable decline during the transition between the second and third Gender Action Plans due to changes in the monitoring framework. Nonetheless, the positive trends observed across both periods suggest a sustained improvement in implementing institutional enablers from 2019 to 2023, as shown in figure V.

Figure V  
Percentage of country offices meeting the Gender Action Plan Standard Index



Source: Internal monitoring data and evaluators' calculations.

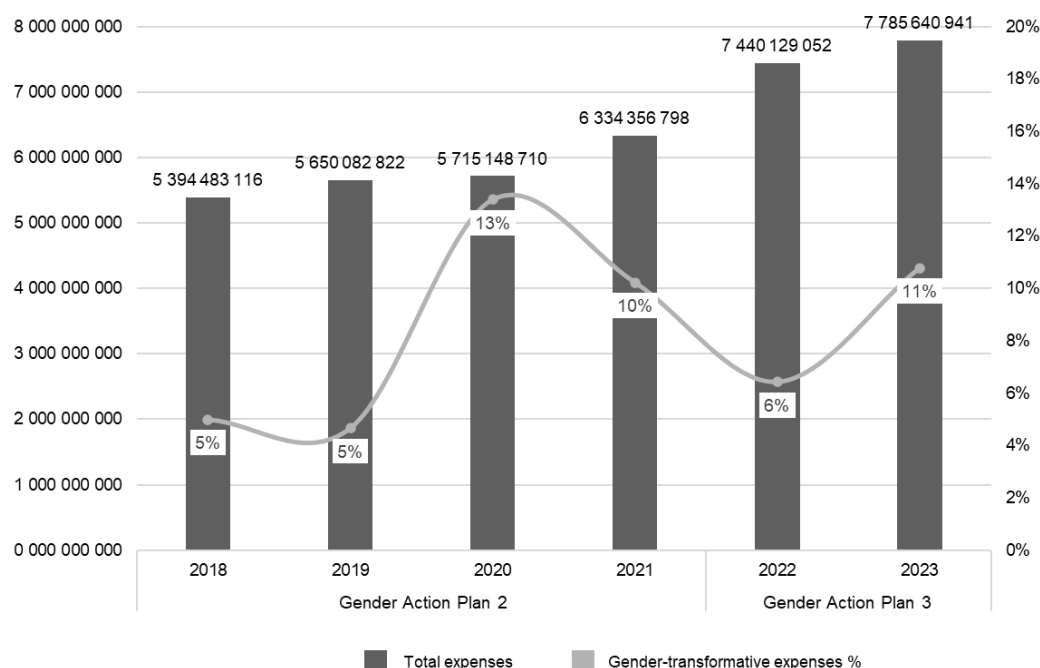
26. **Gender-transformative results are increasingly integrated into planning,** and many country offices have contextualized Gender Action Plans. However, their use can be limited by a lack of alignment with sectoral plans.

27. **Gender analysis and research are increasingly conducted, albeit the quality and usage are variable.** UNICEF has produced an important body of evidence of research on gender quality programming and has established avenues to disseminate evidence to programmes at regional and country levels. Nevertheless, there is a gap between the research that is generated from interventions piloted at the country level and its use to scale up interventions.

28. **Under the third Gender Action Plan, the monitoring and evaluation of gender institutional enablers has been strengthened. At the same time, programmatic monitoring and evaluation is less ambitious in documenting the contribution to gender-transformative results,** particularly at the outcome level. While UNICEF guidance clearly states that Gender Action Plan reporting is meant to serve both global accountability and country-level learning and programming, the monitoring system is primarily geared towards upward accountability.

29. **UNICEF is not yet meeting its overall target on financing resources for gender, and the distribution of funds is skewed towards emergency programming,** with gaps in funding for organizational capacity and some Goal Areas. Gender resource tracking has improved, with better systems in place, but these are considered complex to use and not constantly implemented.

Figure VI

**Gender-transformative expenditure out of total UNICEF expenditure, in United States dollars**

Source: Internal expenditure data for the periods 2019–2021 and 2022–2023.

30. While promising results have been achieved in setting up a solid gender architecture across the organization, **UNICEF still has a way to ensure that this architecture successfully drives the integration of gender equality across the organization.** For example, although UNICEF has continued to develop trainings on gender equality, the roll-out of these is not yet moving at pace. There are some gaps in the scope and content of the training in terms of addressing individual values, attitudes and biases, and providing specific technical guidance to sectors.

31. **UNICEF has an increasing number of partnerships with women’s and girls’ organizations, but less so with grass-roots civil society organizations.** Grass-roots organizations, however, encounter significant challenges in meeting procurement criteria and accessing funds. To enhance partnerships with women- and girl-led organizations, UNICEF has invested in building their gender-related capacities. For instance, in Myanmar, UNICEF has focused on building the capacity of grass-roots organizations on protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, safeguarding, gender, disability inclusion and grant management. However, efforts remain limited in supporting the long-term sustainability of these organizations and their ability to advocate for systemic changes that promote gender equality. A partnership mapping, such as the one completed by Fiji within the Pacific Multi-Country Office, is a good way to understand who, outside existing partnerships, is working in the space, including feminist-led or youth-led organizations, and how UNICEF may better partner with them.

32. **There is a lack of a common understanding of the comparative advantage of UNICEF on gender equality.** UNICEF has established joint programmes with other United Nations agencies to promote gender equality; however, the lack of understanding of the UNICEF comparative advantage creates the risk of missed opportunities for collaboration or duplication of efforts at the country level.

## Box 1

**UNICEF formal and informal collaboration with other United Nations agencies on gender: examples from country case studies**

- Bosnia and Herzegovina: IT Girls initiative (UNICEF, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women)), and a Gender Accelerator Framework in the pipeline (UNFPA, UNDP and UN-Women).
- Mozambique: Two joint programmes with a focus on gender (UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, Rapariga Biz- Action for Girls and Young Women (UNFPA, UNESCO, UN-Women and UNICEF)) and a gender-responsive “UN Joint Programme on Social Protection” (UNICEF and ILO)).
- Egypt: Joint programme on addressing female genital mutilation (with UNFPA), and partnerships on gender programming (with UN-Women) and on refugee and migrant youth and children, including a gender-responsive component (with UNHCR).
- Bangladesh: UNICEF participates in United Nations coordination through United Nations Country Team working groups on specific projects on ending child marriage, distribution of dignity kits to women and girls, and campaigns and health-related interventions for adolescents.
- Peru: UNICEF has conducted high-profile joint advocacy efforts on ending child marriage (with UNFPA and other agencies) and on programming in humanitarian settings (UNFPA, International Organization for Migration, UNHCR).

**33. UNICEF is regarded as one of the most influential United Nations agencies, owing to its extensive programmatic reach, which positions it well to advocate for girls’ and child rights.** This wide footprint gives UNICEF a strong platform to amplify its advocacy efforts in public campaigns and with Governments and Member States.

**34. Leadership of senior management in the organization has been critical to promoting the Gender Action Plan and the wider recognition that gender is everyone’s responsibility, but a lack of formal accountability measures** means that not everyone puts this responsibility into practice. Senior leadership has been instrumental in raising the profile of the Gender Action Plan, but it may need to be consolidated, especially at the middle management level. Gender is also increasingly perceived as the responsibility of everyone at UNICEF. Still, in practice, wider staff ownership of the gender equality agenda seems to be limited by a lack of formal and precise accountabilities for gender results beyond gender-focused staff.

**35. There has been increased emphasis on improving gender equality within the workplace, but there is room for improvement.** While gender parity is achieved at UNICEF headquarters, there remain discrepancies in gender across different staff categories. The UNICEF recruitment policy tends to consider parity in isolation from the broader goal of improving gender equality in the workplace. Although UNICEF staffing policy has become more intentional in considering gender equality, benefiting staff overall, and steps have been taken to address issues of culture and inclusivity in the workplace, there is scope to improve on these policies and ensure more systematic roll-out, particularly at the country level.

**36. UNICEF has strengthened its systems to enforce a zero-tolerance policy for sexual misconduct,** following recommendations from an independent panel review of its response to protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment and the report of the Independent Task Force on Workplace Gender-Discrimination, Sexual

Harassment, Harassment and Abuse of Authority. Key improvements include establishing a temporary diversity, equity and inclusion unit under the Office of the Executive Director, which has now been integrated into the new Division of People and Culture. However, these strengthened systems have not yet been fully implemented at the country level. Interviews with stakeholders from both country case studies and global offices reveal that country-level human resources units are not yet fully equipped to address issues of misconduct and protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. Additionally, internal structures for protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment remain less developed than those focused on external-facing efforts. In this context, the establishment of the Division of People and Culture holds promise for addressing these challenges by enhancing the role and capacity of human resources across the organization.

### C. Programmatic results and integration of gender equality across programmes

**37. Indicators on Gender Action Plan programming and expenditures show that there has been progress in gender integration across the Goal Areas,** with different levels of investment. Generally, **the approach adopted for gender integration is more responsive than transformative, with transformative programming found more in Goal Area 3 (child protection).** UNICEF gender-transformative expenditures have increased in all Goal Areas, but expenditure in all but one Goal Area (Goal Area 3) remains lower than UN-SWAP's recommendation. Overall, gender equality results are primarily achieved by gender-focused programmes, as outlined in box 2.

Box 2

#### Gender equality across the five Goal Areas of the UNICEF Strategic Plan

**Goal Area 1 – Every child, including adolescents, survives and thrives, with access to nutritious diets, quality healthcare, nurturing practices and essential supplies:** Programming focuses primarily on gender-sensitive or responsive interventions, such as improved access and uptake of services by women and girls. Many of the programmes target women based on their biological and gendered roles, and there is limited engagement with boys and men. However, for instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, advocacy campaigns sought to change men's attitudes to take more interest in their child's health and nutrition, and the gender bias of preschool teachers, favouring giving boys more nutritious food than girls. In Mozambique, the Rapariga Biz programme promotes and protects the sexual health and reproductive rights of adolescent girls and young women (10–24 years old) by empowering adolescent girls to assert their rights and make informed decisions, and engaging boys.

**Goal Area 2 – Every child, including adolescents, learns and acquires skills for the future:** Results related to the education sector appear uneven but with notable country-level achievements in upstream system-level change, as well as with marginalized and out-of-school adolescent girls. A comprehensive strategy promoting gender-transformative results has also been developed; however, its implementation is constrained by limited gender expertise within the education sector at the country office level and within the national education departments. This has led to missed opportunities for developing education systems that address harmful gender and social norms at scale. Examples of gender-responsive and gender-transformative programmes and approaches include, for instance, in Bangladesh, an alternative learning programme that was implemented along with entrepreneurship training and other relevant soft skills for out-of-school adolescent boys and girls, with some implementing partners offering gender non-stereotypical vocational training to girls, such as an electricians' course, driving, auto repair, etc. In Peru, the ChicasTec

programme targets girls between the ages of 15 and 18 years in vulnerable situations who have an interest in professional careers related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) areas. The programme includes interventions in training girls on STEM and digital skills, building the capacity of education sector professionals to integrate digital skills, and advocating to change gender norms and stereotypes.

**Goal Area 3 – Every child, including adolescents, is protected from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and harmful behaviours:** The Child Protection section has adopted a more strategic and evidence-based approach to gender integration, and there is significant opportunity for more transformative work. The focus of UNICEF on prevention of violence has also grown over the period. However, to capitalize on opportunities to do more, UNICEF needs to address the quality of programming. Joint child protection programmes have shown positive results in policy change, but their approach to gender-transformative programming could be strengthened. For example, in Egypt, the Dawwie programme was designed using the socio-ecological model, ensuring a transformative and a holistic approach, and working with girls, boys and their families. The programme aims to shift norms that hold back adolescent girls and includes initiatives such as storytelling circles, intergenerational and community dialogue, digital learning and opportunities to build new skills, as well as protection, health and nutrition services. The programme implemented jointly by Social and Behaviour Change section and Child Protection Section has reached 600,000 people to date. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a community engagement programme to prevent and respond to violence against children uses facilitated dialogues with community members, including men, to catalyse gender-based violence prevention actions, and provides training to diverse sectors to strengthen response services for survivors of gender-based violence.

**Goal Area 4 – Every child, including adolescents, has access to water, sanitation and hygiene and lives in a safe and sustainable climate and environment:** The Strategy for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, 2016–2030 sets out an ambition for more gender-transformative work; however, current programme and policy interventions are mostly gender-sensitive or responsive, focusing on improved access and uptake of services. More gender-transformative approaches in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for instance, include efforts to involve women in jobs traditionally reserved for men, for example, by training women water management and governance, technical skills (masons, plumbing), digital skills for WASH systems monitoring or recycling plastic to build latrines, or projects combining income-generating activities for women and WASH in refugee camps.

**Goal Area 5 – Every child, including adolescents, has access to inclusive social protection and lives free from poverty:** Output and outcome data suggest that the increase in dedicated resources, gender-related evidence and expertise have contributed to good progress on gender integration. As a result of these investments, UNICEF has seen significant results in the uptake and integration of gender in social protection, which is more gender-responsive. The evaluation also identified several promising windows of opportunities to enhance social protection programmes to make them more gender-transformative (for instance, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other countries). Across the board, however, the evaluation found fewer examples of interventions or programmes supporting women and girls with disabilities.

**38. UNICEF efforts to mainstream gender in the humanitarian sector are reflected by the increased guidance in place,** enhanced gender analysis, disaggregation of data and involvement of women's and girls' organizations.

However, the ambitions set have not fully materialized, partly because of insufficient gender technical expertise in humanitarian operations.

**39. UNICEF is also increasingly recognizing the needs of women and girls in its climate change work but has a long way to go to integrate gender in practice.** The third Gender Action Plan priorities regarding adolescent girls have gained momentum, and a growing number of programmes are working with young girls. UNICEF has successfully used its comparative advantage to effectively support individual change among adolescent girls and strengthen youth and adolescent girl networks and mobilization. Wider changes to social norms across the socio-ecological model have generally been slower or on a smaller scale. Girls might experience greater risks of backlash and stigma if they are not supported by their surrounding community.

**40. UNICEF ambition for transformative programming has created an impetus to go beyond gender-sensitive programming, and some positive examples have been noted.** However, several factors limit the agency's ability to sustainably transform social and gender norms, including the depth of gender analysis, existing programming modalities, and staff understanding of gender-transformative programming.

41. Internally, progress on gender equality has been facilitated by several enabling factors, although certain barriers continue to hinder systematic advancement. The progress achieved can be attributed to strong, committed leadership on gender buy-in and motivation from an expanding group of staff (including dedicated gender specialists and an active gender working group), and accountability mechanisms that emphasize the collective responsibility for gender outcomes. Key processes, such as gender analysis and the regular monitoring, communication and discussion of gender results during annual plan reviews, have also contributed to this progress. However, challenges remain, including the insufficient depth and quality of intersectional gender analysis to guide transformative programming, a limited understanding of what constitutes gender-transformative programming, and a lack of operational guidance on how to design such interventions. These challenges hinder teams and offices from fully integrating gender considerations into their work. Additional obstacles include the short-term nature of interventions, complex procedures for partnering with small organizations, quality concerns in programme design and monitoring, difficulties in drawing lessons from experience, and the limited influence of gender-focused staff.

42. Externally, several factors have both enabled and constrained progress. Enabling factors include working with Governments that actively support the gender equality agenda and establishing meaningful partnerships with women- and youth-led organizations. The use of digital technology has proven particularly effective in reaching remote or mobile communities. On the other hand, external challenges include geographic remoteness and limited access, especially in conflict-affected settings, high mobility among populations, conservative government stances, and restrictive environments that limit the capacity of civil society organizations to engage in rights-based work.

## **IV. Conclusions and the way forward**

43. The overarching conclusions outlined below are based on the findings of this evaluation, analysed against the assumptions in the evaluation's theory of change. They acknowledge UNICEF progress in advancing gender equality and encourage the organization to sustain and strengthen its transformative agenda for women and girls.



**44. Harnessing momentum: Operationalizing transformative ambitions on gender equality in a new Gender Action Plan, reinforced by the new Strategic Plan.** UNICEF is on the right path, and this momentum should be harnessed through a fourth Gender Action Plan that emphasizes the operationalization of the organization's transformative ambitions on gender equality by addressing challenges related to institutional enablers, including:

- (a) Strengthening accountability at all levels, from individual staff to the global, regional and country levels, and across sectors;
- (b) Reforming UNICEF programming and partnership approaches; and
- (c) Enhancing accountability for gender-related expenditures and outcomes.

45. While the Gender Action Plans have established a solid foundation for promoting gender equality and progress has been made, gender is not yet fully integrated across the organization. UNICEF must adapt better to the current context and aim to achieve gender equality at scale. Although accountability mechanisms for gender exist through monitoring and evaluation systems, benchmarking and gender architecture, accountability is insufficient at country and individual levels, particularly among senior and middle management in country offices and across sectors. Additionally, there is a need to strengthen the gender architecture at regional and country levels. The Gender Action Plan monitoring and evaluation system has improved and supports greater accountability and benchmarking; however, indicators are not always relevant for tracking gender-transformative interventions. Financial resources are not adequately directed towards building core organizational capacity, and larger programmatic areas often have a smaller share of gender-transformative expenditures, leading to missed opportunities to leverage the UNICEF position for larger-scale impact. UNICEF programmes are increasingly gender-responsive and address the needs of women and girls. Nevertheless, more attention is needed to adopt an intersectional approach that supports women and girls in all their diversity (e.g. girls with disabilities). Although UNICEF effectively empowers and supports young people's leadership, particularly adolescent girls, it is less effective in achieving gender-transformative programming, which requires addressing the root causes of gender inequality and applying a socio-ecological model. To achieve more transformative results at scale, UNICEF must reform its programming approaches and prioritize meaningful partnerships with civil society organizations, especially those led by women and girls.

**46. Bridging the gap: Advancing organizational ownership of UNICEF gender transformative programming.** UNICEF has established an ambitious vision for gender-transformative programming with the third Gender Action Plan and the Gender Policy, supported by leadership and a dedicated group of skilled gender staff and champions. However, this ambition is not yet fully understood or embraced across the organization, and the Gender Action Plan's expectation that "gender is the responsibility of all" has not yet been realized. Many staff members still lack clarity on how to put gender goals into practice. While capacity is a significant challenge, the strong desire to learn about gender within the organization presents an opportunity for UNICEF to ensure that this ambition is translated into practice.

**47. Clarifying the vision: Strengthening consistency in implementing the Gender Policy and Gender Action Plan conceptual framework.** The current definition of gender transformative programming and gender equality is not consistently articulated across guiding documents and among staff, leading to varied interpretations and hindering effective implementation and broad-based buy-in. UNICEF can leverage its strengths to make a meaningful contribution to gender equality through the following programmatic priorities:

(a) Building on the momentum around young girls, while developing a clearer narrative that positions gender equality as central to children's rights and distinguishes the role of UNICEF relative to that of UNFPA.

(b) Emphasizing a gender socialization approach that aligns with the focus of UNICEF on children and adolescents to support the development and expansion of positive equitable norms during childhood and adolescence, which involves engaging with parents, community leaders, boys and men, enabling work across the socio-ecological model. The model is used by UNICEF to help assess whether an approach, intervention or programme is transformative and to what degree (e.g., does the intervention go beyond the individual level to address barriers at the family, community, culture and policy, and systems levels?). The gender socialization approach also addresses the important issue of involving boys and men and could strengthen parenting interventions.

(c) Utilizing the scale of its programmes and its multisectoral positioning across the Goal Areas, as the mandate of UNICEF is particularly suited for addressing the root causes of gender inequality. This requires enhanced gender mainstreaming, including in humanitarian programmes.

**48. Advancing gender parity and more: Strengthening UNICEF efforts to foster an inclusive workplace for women.** UNICEF has made strides towards becoming a better workplace for women, thanks to efforts to address gender imbalances in staffing and the workplace, as well as the growing number of "gender activists" within the organization. However, measures to ensure gender parity are not always implemented as intended, and more work is needed to improve the well-being of women in the workplace, particularly in areas such as protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. Recruiting young staff who are passionate about gender equality has brought new energy to the organization, using the Gender Policy and the Gender Action Plan as a rallying point, which is a promising sign for the future.

## V. Recommendations

49. The following four recommendations are those prioritized in the evaluation report, following the analysis and interpretation of the evaluation findings. Key internal and external stakeholders co-created and validated them during the evaluation process. By implementing these recommendations, UNICEF can strengthen its ability to advance gender equality, fulfilling its mandate effectively in the six remaining years of the Decade of Action towards the 2030 Agenda.

**50. Recommendation 1: Update the vision for gender equality, refer to it consistently, and ensure alignment between the fourth Gender Action Plan and all policy frameworks across Goal Areas and in the humanitarian sector.**

**UNICEF mandate:** UNICEF should update its vision in the new Strategic Plan with a more explicit narrative placing gender equality and women's rights as central to the attainment of children's rights and how they are linked. The fourth Gender Action Plan should elaborate on this, while also referencing the relevant human rights frameworks (e.g. the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the new UNICEF Child Rights at UNICEF's Core – A Framework for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Declaration). UNICEF should also ensure alignment between the updated vision of the new Strategic Plan, the Gender Policy, the fourth Gender Action Plan programmatic priorities and sectoral strategies, including on intersectionality, and cross-reference the GAP and the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action more explicitly. The new Strategic Plan should clearly outline results for gender equality. (Very high priority; likely to require only staff time)

**51. Recommendation 2: Develop a fourth Gender Action Plan that is more explicit on “how” to operationalize it at all levels and implement programmes for gender equality.**

**Fourth Gender Action Plan and contextualization:** UNICEF should develop a new Gender Action Plan that sets out a guiding framework and priorities for programmatic and institutional results on gender equality, followed by operationalization guidelines in key areas. These guidelines should include a menu of gender-transformative options that could be implemented under each programmatic priority or Goal Area, including cross-cutting issues. Guidance on the development of national Gender Action Plans should also be developed, as well as how to link them to gender programme reviews and country programme document (CPD) reviews. Senior-level management meetings at the headquarters, regional and country levels, and in emergencies, should regularly include gender priorities for management reflection and action. (Very high priority; likely to require only staff time)

**Accountabilities and gender architecture:** UNICEF should strengthen accountabilities to implement the Gender Action Plan among senior and middle management across sectors at country, regional and headquarters levels. This can be done by: updating job descriptions and performance evaluation reviews; ensuring that gender specialists report to the country representative or deputy representative; appointing sectoral gender specialists embedded in sections; ensuring that gender focal points attend country management team meetings and that gender working groups include staff from across sections and operations and are chaired by the country representative or deputy representative; and appointing gender specialists based on merit and context, not just on budget (i.e. country offices demonstrating increasing gender results and portfolios or proving that the context warrants a specialist should be prioritized). (Very high priority; likely to require repurposing and/or upgrading some posts, and new funding in country offices)

**Financing:** UNICEF should strengthen support to country offices to use expenditure tracking more effectively; incentivize country office senior management to spend at least 15 per cent of unearmarked funding for gender-transformative work; ensure that 15 per cent of gender-transformative expenditure is reached across Goal Areas; emphasize achievements towards increasing levels of integrated expenses; and track and report on regular resources dedicated to strengthening internal capacity on gender at headquarters. (Very high priority; likely to require only staff time)

**Programming modalities:** UNICEF should encourage country offices to develop gender equality programmes that align with the CPD cycle and last approximately five years, as well as align UNICEF gender programming processes to “gold programming standards”, as recommended by the new UNICEF Country Programme Planning and Design Guidance, to ensure that the incremental steps towards gender transformative results are clear and reflected in monitoring and evaluation frameworks. The participatory development of the theory of change is also a pivotal step in motivating and mobilizing staff on gender-transformative programming. (High priority; likely to require only staff time, with some cost savings in the long run)

**Monitoring and evaluation:** UNICEF should ensure that impact- and outcome-level targets and core standard indicators across Goal Areas better capture change at the outcome level, and consider using progress markers or shifting towards indicators that aim to capture contributions towards systemic change. (High priority; likely to require only staff time)

**Partnerships:** UNICEF should invest in the institutional capacity of civil society organizations working on gender, and revise partnership procedures to enable

working more with small civil society organizations, especially women- and girl-led organizations. (High priority; likely to require only staff time)

**Gender analysis:** UNICEF should make gender programme reviews mandatory in every CPD, conduct robust gender analysis of all sector portfolios, and ensure that they are reviewed on a regular basis to inform programming, as well as deepen the quality of analysis to focus more on barriers and power. (High priority; likely to require only staff time)

**52. Recommendation 3: Train, motivate and hold staff accountable for the operationalization of gender integration across all sectors.**

**Technical staff capacities:** UNICEF should develop a gender equality capacity strengthening plan and roll out training (in person as well as online) that is more utilization-focused, more practical, supports peer learning, is tailored for different sectors and touches on intersectionality. Training should also address personal and organizational biases, attitudes and norms, and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. (High priority; likely to require only staff time)

**53. Recommendation 4: Review recruitment, parity and workplace well-being policies, procedures and practices in line with the UNICEF vision for gender equality.**

**Human resources:** UNICEF should review and update policies and address the existing practice of recruiting male staff when the 70 per cent threshold is reached, as well as make sure that recruitment processes ask about personal values to ensure that they align with UNICEF values. (High priority; likely to require only staff time)

**Workplace culture:** UNICEF should provide better support to women, including those with children, and create more safe spaces. UNICEF should also develop clearer protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment reporting mechanisms and speed up the management of cases by the UNICEF Office of Internal Audit and Investigations. Gender gap surveys and the well-being of women should be monitored more regularly. (High priority; likely to require only staff time)

## **VI. Draft decision**

### *The Executive Board*

1. *Takes note* of the evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, its summary ([E/ICEF/2025/3](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2025/4](#));
2. *Also takes note* of the evaluation of the UNICEF Gender Policy and Gender Action Plans, its summary ([E/ICEF/2025/5](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2025/6](#)).

## **Annex**

### **Evaluation of UNICEF Gender Policy and Gender Action Plans**

1. Due to space limitations, the evaluation of the UNICEF Gender Policy and Gender Action Plans is not contained within the present annex.
  2. The report is available on the UNICEF Evaluation Office website: <https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/evaluation-implementation-unicef-gender-policy-and-gender-action-plans-gap-2-gap-3>.
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