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‘Gender equality, the empowerment of all women and girls and their human rights across the Sustainable Development Goals: Assessing progress towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda’

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Gender-Responsive SDG Implementation in Contexts of Crisis, Climate Change and Inequality

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* The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of UN Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.

The 2030 Agenda opened a political and institutional door for gender mainstreaming that had not existed before. Its universal framework, integrated goals and targets, and commitment to leave no one behind gave national women's machineries a language for connecting women's human rights to the core business of government. In Jordan, it helped move the national women's agenda beyond a parallel strategy owned by one institution – with no mandate or resources to implement – and towards a whole-of-government framework linked to planning, budgeting, data and sectoral accountability.

This opening should not be confused with depoliticization or guaranteed implementation. Women's human rights remain a politically contested space. The Jordanian experience shows both the value of global goal-setting and its limits when accountability is weak, resistance persists and institutional progress is not matched by transformative change in women's lives.

Using the Sustainable Development Goals to redesign national gender governance

Jordan's previous national strategy for women illustrated a common implementation failure. It contained more than 500 indicators and extensive proposed programmes, while gender focal points and women's units existed across most ministries. Yet the strategy was not embedded in government planning and financing. Responsibility remained concentrated in the national women's machinery, and line ministries could treat implementation as optional.¹

The National Strategy for Women in Jordan 2020–2025 tried to fix both problems at once, the policy gap and the implementation gap. Its governance architecture included a high-level interministerial committee; a technical committee led by the Jordanian National Commission for Women; thematic task forces involving government, civil society, academia and development partners; and a data and indicators group co-led by the Department of Statistics. The purpose was to distribute ownership and make the institutional isolation of women's issues more difficult.

Participation was built into this structure. More than 1,074 people were consulted across Jordan's twelve governorates, including local council representatives, refugee women, women with disabilities, community groups and professional associations. The process applied the leave no one behind principle by allowing evidence from outside the capital to shape national priorities. At the national level, political parties, parliamentarians, private sector, in addition to national level non-governmental organizations, academic institutions and think tanks were also included in the consultation, design and validation process.

The strategy combined outcomes on rights and participation, freedom from gender-based violence, supportive social norms and gender-responsive institutions. The last two are often missing from national women's strategies, although they are the conditions required to sustain progress. Policy coherence meant mapping initiatives to specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets and linking them to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action; the universal periodic review

¹ Jordanian National Commission for Women. 2020. National Strategy for Women in Jordan 2020–2025. Available at: <https://www.women.jo/en/node/7935>.

recommendations; the women, peace and security agenda; and relevant national strategies. Where possible, indicators drew on data already produced by the national statistical system.

From institutional architecture to implementation

The strategy was adopted in March 2020, immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic intensified violence, social protection gaps and women's unpaid care burdens. An addendum was developed to respond to these impacts. The subsequent action plan was prepared ministry by ministry, using programmes and budget lines already included in sectoral plans and the Government Indicative Executive Programme. The intention was to shift gender equality from a Jordanian National Commission for Women-owned agenda to obligations implemented through each sector's existing accountability structure.

The same governance and consultation infrastructure supported Jordan's second Voluntary National Review, submitted in 2022. Task forces already in place let civil society and women-led organizations contribute, and the review addressed gender across all the goals rather than parking it under SDG 5 alone. The strategy was later connected to Jordan's economic, political and public-sector modernization pathways. The lesson holds: a women's agenda survives longer when it is built into the national development architecture rather than sitting beside it.²

Yet institutionalization remained incomplete. A proposed gender-financing tracking system, designed to reveal thematic and geographic allocations and identify gaps or duplication, faced significant resistance. Governments may accept policy language and coordination bodies while resisting systems that reveal which sectors are not delivering and where women remain underserved. The closer gender mainstreaming moves to budgets, authority and measurable accountability, the more politically contested it becomes.

The limits of voluntary and index-driven accountability

The SDGs have supported planning frameworks, data systems and coordination mechanisms, but these tools operate within political economies that can narrow their transformative potential. Gender equality is often reduced to women's economic participation, while rights, redistribution, bodily autonomy, political power, violence and social norms receive less sustained attention. Donors can reinforce this fragmentation by funding interventions that are easier to quantify rather than those that challenge structural barriers.

There is also a growing risk of index-driven compliance. Governments increasingly study global rankings, including legal and gender-gap indices, and pursue limited reforms that can improve their scores. Some changes may be useful, but a higher ranking is not evidence of transformation. Accountability must examine implementation, distributional effects and the lived realities of

² The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. 2022. Jordan Voluntary National Review 2022: Weaving Possibilities. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3997271?v=pdf>.

diverse groups of women. Measurement should expose inequality, not reward visible adjustments that leave underlying power relations intact.

These weaknesses have become more consequential amid protracted conflict, displacement, climate change, environmental degradation and pressure on natural resources. Even countries not directly at war experience economic shocks, refugee movements and expanding security expenditures. At the same time, civic space and financing for gender equality are shrinking. Commitments that remain separate from core government systems are therefore especially vulnerable.

The global accountability gap is equally significant. The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is the principal intergovernmental forum for gender equality, but its outcomes are negotiated and non-binding. Civil society participation is formally recognized, yet access does not necessarily translate into influence over negotiations or official narratives. Women's rights organizations that challenge government performance are often separated from the rooms in which Member States present achievements and negotiate outcomes. More accommodating organizations may gain greater access, while critical and grassroots voices remain concentrated in parallel civil society spaces. Formal participation without meaningful influence weakens accountability and the quality of global policymaking.

Priorities for the post-2030 framework

The post-2030 framework should retain the leverage of universal goals while correcting the weaknesses of voluntary accountability. Gender equality should remain both a stand-alone goal and a requirement across all goals, explicitly connected to CEDAW; the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action; women, peace and security commitments; and climate and environmental frameworks.

At national level, governments should translate commitments into sectoral targets, funded programmes, public expenditure tracking and transparent reporting on outcomes. National women's machineries need the authority, resources and access to planning and budget processes required to challenge sectoral performance. Statistical systems, parliaments, audit institutions, national human rights institutions and women's rights organizations should have defined accountability roles.

At global level, progress should be assessed through evidence of structural and lived change, not only aggregate indicators, rankings or activity reports. Women-led and feminist organizations must participate in agenda setting, review and follow-up, with protected space for independent and

critical voices. The effort to revitalize the CSW offers an opportunity to narrow the distance between civil society participation and intergovernmental decision-making.³

The central lesson is that the SDGs created valuable institutional leverage, but architecture alone does not redistribute power. Gender mainstreaming becomes transformative only when it changes government priorities, financing decisions and accountability relationships. A credible post-2030 agenda must make it harder for governments to avoid responsibility for the rights and realities of women and girls across every sector.

³ UN Women. Undated. “Revitalization of the Commission on the Status of Women.” Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/commission-on-the-status-of-women/revitalization>.