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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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**From Evidence to Action:
Leveraging SDG Target 5.a for Gender-Responsive
Land Governance and Rural Women’s Empowerment**

Observer paper prepared by:

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*

* 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.

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development elevated women's equal rights to land from a sectoral concern to a globally recognized development priority. Through Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 5.a, governments, development partners, civil society organizations, including women's organizations, and communities have been encouraged to strengthen the evidence base on women's land rights and to support the legal, policy and institutional reforms needed to recognize and enforce women's equal rights to agricultural land and other productive resources. For rural women, secure land rights are fundamental to livelihoods, agricultural productivity, food security, nutrition and economic resilience. Secure tenure strengthens women's capacity to invest in their land, adopt sustainable and long-term land management practices, and diversify agricultural production. Women's land ownership is associated with greater household food security, while their participation in land governance contributes to more sustainable land management outcomes. However, women are less likely than men to own or have secure rights to land globally and typically hold a much smaller share of agricultural land ownership; in 2024, across 108 countries, 40 per cent of women reported sole or joint homeownership compared with 48 per cent of men, reflecting a persistent gender gap that has widened since 2020.

This evidence informs FAO's systems approach to agrifood systems, demonstrating the centrality of gender equality and women's empowerment in advancing resilient and inclusive agrifood systems. As the custodian agency for SDG indicators 5.a.2 and 5.a.1, FAO has supported 99 countries in assessing legal and policy frameworks governing women's land rights and 79 countries in reporting on women's ownership of and secure tenure rights to agricultural land, respectively. Together, these indicators provide comparative evidence on women's land rights in law and in practice. Beyond monitoring progress, the reporting process on SDG indicator 5.a.2 brings together government institutions, national statistical offices, civil society and academia to interpret findings, strengthen national ownership and inform reforms and programming. FAO's broader land and natural resource governance work further complements this process by supporting the institutions and systems needed to translate legal and policy commitments into secure land rights. The importance of women's land rights has been further highlighted through the 2026 International Year of the Woman Farmer, which presents a timely opportunity to accelerate action on secure land tenure for rural women and strengthen momentum for gender-responsive land governance in the lead-up to the seventy-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

Drawing on experiences from the past decade, this paper examines how SDG monitoring has evolved from a reporting exercise into a catalyst for policy dialogue, institutional coordination and legal, policy and institutional reform. It shows how the 2030 Agenda has created an evidence-to-action pathway that has strengthened gender-responsive land governance, fostered collaboration among institutions and stakeholders, and supported the implementation of global normative frameworks on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. The lessons demonstrate how SDG Target 5.a can help translate evidence into reforms that advance women's land rights, while contributing to inclusive rural transformation and more sustainable agrifood systems.

Process and mechanism: Translating SDG monitoring into legal and governance reforms

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, 119 countries have engaged in monitoring SDG 5.a.2 through nationally led processes involving institutions responsible for agriculture, land governance, gender equality, statistics, justice and planning, alongside civil society organizations, women's organizations, academia and development partners. Supported by FAO through methodological guidance, capacity development and technical assistance, these processes have generated evidence on legal and policy frameworks regulating women's land rights while strengthening national ownership of findings.

Beyond contributing to global reporting, SDG 5.a monitoring has helped countries identify gaps between legal commitments and implementation, strengthen coordination across institutions and inform gender-responsive land governance reforms. By bringing together legal assessments with survey and administrative data, the process creates opportunities to connect evidence on formal rights with broader questions of institutional capacity, social norms, implementation practices and women's lived experiences of land access, ownership, participation and decision-making.

The experiences of the United Republic of Tanzania, Niger and Sierra Leone demonstrate different pathways through which SDG 5.a monitoring can drive change: by creating institutional dialogue, supporting legal reform and building an evidence base, reinforcing longer-term national land governance processes, and connecting evidence with implementation and broader gender equality frameworks.

The United Republic of Tanzania illustrates how SDG 5.a.2 monitoring can support evidence-based policy dialogue and reform processes. In 2021, the Ministry of Constitutional and Legal Affairs submitted the country's first SDG 5.a.2 report and assessed the legal and policy framework for women's land rights in mainland Tanzania using the SDG indicator methodology, with FAO technical support. Building on this initial assessment, the United Republic of Tanzania updated its SDG 5.a.2 report in 2025, complementing it with a separate assessment for Zanzibar. The update was conducted under the FAO–IFAD–UN Women–WFP Joint Programme on Accelerating Rural Women's Economic Empowerment (JP-RWEE Phase II) and supported multi-level policy dialogue across institutions responsible for gender, development planning, agriculture, land administration, legal affairs and statistics. The updated assessment also informed the 2024/25 review of the 1995 National Land Policy, including discussions on aligning customary norms with statutory principles of non-discrimination, particularly in relation to inheritance. Through this process, SDG 5.a.2 provided evidence to support reflection on legal and institutional measures needed to strengthen women's land rights.

Following these consultations and continued policy engagement, the Ministry of Lands formally requested FAO technical assistance in 2026 to review the Land Act and Village Land Act. By creating a shared understanding of gaps and opportunities in women's land rights, the process supported dialogue across sectors and informed reform discussions. It also created opportunities for learning between mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar through comparative analysis of legal frameworks and reform experiences led by both planning commissions.

The experience of Niger shows how SDG 5.a monitoring can become embedded within a longer national process of gender-responsive land governance reform. Since 2014, FAO has supported the Government of Niger in strengthening land governance through a participatory process that promoted dialogue among government institutions, traditional authorities, civil society and other stakeholders. Anchored in the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGTs), the process created spaces to address key land governance challenges, including inequalities in women's access to and control over land. Efforts were also made to strengthen the participation and capacity of women's organizations alongside other stakeholder groups.

Within this broader reform context from the past, SDG 5.a monitoring provided an additional evidence base and accountability mechanism for assessing progress on women's land rights. In 2020, Niger's Ministry for the Promotion of Women and Children reported for the first time on SDG 5.a.2, assessing the extent to which the legal framework recognizes women's equal rights to land. This reporting was aligned with ongoing government efforts to address barriers faced by rural women, including unequal access to productive resources and limited participation in land-related decision-making. SDG indicator 5.a.1 provided complementary evidence on the extent to which legal commitments were translated into rights in practice. The country's SDG 5.a.1 report shows that, in 2019, only 9.4 per cent of women compared with 66.5 per cent of men had ownership or secure tenure rights over agricultural land. Additional data from the national Agricultural Campaign in 2024 indicate that women represented only 6.14 per cent of agricultural household heads compared with 93.86 per cent of men. These findings underscored the need to examine not only whether legal frameworks recognize women's rights, but also how those rights are experienced and exercised in practice within households, communities and local institutions.

The Government of Niger has continued to emphasize women's participation in land governance. The Rural Land Policy adopted in 2021 incorporated gender equality as one of its guiding principles, providing an important foundation for advancing women's land rights. In 2026, the update of SDG indicator 5.a.2 is being used to further connect monitoring with implementation, gender assessment and international reporting processes, including through Phase II of JP RWEE. Even before validation and official submission, the updated assessment is informing government reflection on progress under the National Land Policy and supporting commitments to adjust the five-year implementation plan. FAO is currently implementing a complementary field research involving women leaders, cooperatives, local authorities and traditional leaders to examine perceptions of women's rights, participation in decision-making, social norms and customary practices affecting women's ability to access, secure and benefit from land. Findings will contribute to Niger's national gender assessment, inform CEDAW reporting and support final validation of the SDG 5.a.2 update while strengthening implementation of the National Land Policy.

The case of Sierra Leone illustrates how SDG 5.a monitoring can support an evidence-to-action approach to advancing women's land rights within a broader gender equality framework. Since 2015, FAO has supported Sierra Leone's land governance reforms, including through the development of the National Land Policy, recognition of women's customary land rights and SDG monitoring through data collection for indicator 5.a.1 and the country's first assessment under

indicator 5.a.2. These processes contributed to the broader reform environment that led to the adoption of the Customary Land Rights Act and National Land Commission Act in 2022, which recognize women's equal customary land rights.

These reforms were reinforced by Sierra Leone's broader gender equality commitments. The Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Policy provides a framework for addressing gender inequalities, strengthening gender-responsive planning and promoting women's participation in economic and social development, including access to productive resources and decision-making. FAO contributed technical inputs to the review of the GEWE Policy, strengthening links between gender equality commitments, women's economic empowerment and access to land and other productive resources. The commitment to gender equality was further strengthened through the adoption of the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act No. 23 of 2022.

Within this evolving policy and legal environment, the second SDG 5.a.2 assessment in 2026 provides an opportunity to measure progress against the baseline established through the initial assessment and document how recent legal and policy reforms have strengthened the framework for women's land rights. SDG indicator 5.a.2 provides a structured benchmark for assessing changes in legal and policy provisions following reforms such as the adoption of the National Land Policy, the Customary Land Rights Act and the National Land Commission Act in 2022. Complementary evidence from SDG indicator 5.a.1 on women's ownership and secure tenure rights to agricultural land, together with the Women's Empowerment Metrics for National Statistical Systems (WEMNS), helps assess whether improvements in the legal framework are accompanied by progress in women's effective access to and control over land.

Legal reform marked an important milestone, but implementation requires continued institutional and social change. In collaboration with national institutions and partners, including UNDP and the World Bank, FAO continues to support implementation through capacity development, legal literacy, community land governance, gender-transformative approaches addressing discriminatory social norms and behaviours, and efforts to strengthen women's participation in Local Land Committees. The findings from the 2026 SDG 5.a.2 update, together with new 5.a.1 and WEMNS data, will support evidence-based implementation of ongoing reforms, including through the World Bank-financed project on innovative solutions for land dispute resolution in Sierra Leone, and help stakeholders better understand where further action is needed to advance women's land rights in practice. The approach is now expanding through new SDG reporting cycles, with Rwanda preparing updated SDG 5.a.2 assessments, Tunisia initiating its first reporting round and countries in the Pacific yet to engage. These processes provide opportunities to connect SDG monitoring with JP RWEE initiatives, sustaining policy dialogue, evidence generation and country-led assessment of progress beyond individual projects.

Coordinated and integrated approach to achieving gender equality results at the country level

The Joint Programme on Accelerating Rural Women's Economic Empowerment (JP RWEE), implemented by FAO, IFAD, UN Women and WFP, demonstrates how joint programming can

strengthen women's land rights by promoting an integrated approach and reinforcing broader rural women's economic empowerment, while generating evidence that informs SDG monitoring and policy dialogue. In the JP RWEE, FAO's expertise in land governance, SDG monitoring and agrifood systems development complemented IFAD's work on rural livelihoods, UN Women's overall positioning in the global gender agenda and WFP's efforts on food security and nutrition, creating a multidimensional response to the structural barriers faced by rural women.

The JP RWEE translated women's land rights into tangible empowerment outcomes across multiple countries. In Niger, it supported the establishment of 20 Basic Land Commissions and two communal commissions in the Dosso region, strengthened women's participation in land governance institutions, including as land mediators, and increased their representation in local decision-making bodies. In the United Republic of Tanzania, 267 Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy (CCROs) were issued to rural women in Mnang'ana village in 2024, strengthening women's tenure security and enabling greater investment in agriculture, access to finance and participation in value chains. These efforts were complemented by interventions on climate-resilient agriculture, financial inclusion, entrepreneurship and market access, while also supporting implementation of the revised National Land Policy and integration of SDG indicator 5.a.2 into national monitoring systems. In the Pacific Islands (Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Tonga), the programme increased awareness of land rights and legal literacy at the community level while laying the groundwork for future SDG 5.a.2 implementation through technical support of FAO's gender and land team and the regional statistician for data collection and analysis on women's land rights.

Across participating countries, the JP RWEE demonstrated that secure land rights are a foundational element of rural women's economic empowerment, but that their benefits are strengthened when combined with complementary interventions. Women's ability to benefit from land depends not only on legal recognition or tenure security, but also on access to productive resources, agricultural services, finance, markets, information, leadership opportunities and decision-making spaces. Through the JP RWEE, work on women's land rights was implemented alongside broader efforts to strengthen rural livelihoods, food security, resilience and women's participation in local governance. This integrated approach helped create conditions in which gains in one area could reinforce progress in others. For example, improved tenure security increased opportunities for women to invest in agricultural production and participate in value chain activities, while legal literacy, community dialogue and support to local governance strengthened women's confidence and participation in land-related decision-making. These experiences suggest that combining land rights interventions with complementary measures can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of efforts to advance rural women's economic empowerment.

A key lesson emerging from this experience is the value of coordinated action in advancing gender equality outcomes. Greater coordination can help ensure that technical assistance, policy dialogue and implementation support are mutually reinforcing. At the same time, governments are required to report against multiple international commitments and frameworks, including the SDGs and human rights obligations. Better alignment across monitoring, reporting and implementation

processes can reduce duplication, strengthen the use of national data and institutional capacities and support collective learning on what works to advance women's land rights and empowerment.

Connecting national reform processes with rural women's voices

Another important dimension of the SDG 5.a.2 process has been its ability to connect national-level policy discussions with the lived experiences of rural women. A recurring lesson from implementation is that strengthening women's land rights requires more than legal reform and national policy dialogue. Laws and policies are implemented within communities, where customary practices, social norms and local governance institutions shape how rights are understood, negotiated and exercised. Connecting national reform processes with the experiences of rural women is therefore essential both for identifying implementation challenges and ensuring that reforms respond to local realities.

FAO has supported this connection through establishing and implementing Dimitra Clubs, a community-led dialogue and gender-transformative approach that creates safe and inclusive spaces where women and men, including young people, jointly reflect on and address issues affecting their communities. Through facilitated dialogue, participants discuss land rights, tenure security, inheritance, access to productive resources and participation in local decision-making, while also critically examining the social norms and power relations that often limit women's rights and opportunities. By engaging women and men together rather than separately, the approach encourages collective reflection, promotes shared responsibility for change and helps transform discriminatory norms affecting women and girls, including those related to land ownership, inheritance practices, marriage and women's participation in household and community decision-making. Through regular discussions, members identify barriers affecting women, develop shared priorities for engagement with local institutions and agree on collective actions. For example, in Niger, Dimitra Clubs have become a cornerstone of community mobilization and local governance. The approach has reached national scale, with 4,937 Clubs and 113,733 members (67,013 women and 46,722 men), positioning the Clubs as a significant community-based platform for inclusive local governance. Through inclusive dialogue within communities and engagement with local land commissions, the clubs contribute to peaceful mediation and have supported the emergence and recognition of women as local peace mediators.

As part of Niger's 2026 update of SDG indicator 5.a.2, these community perspectives are informing national consultations and validation discussions alongside government institutions, civil society organizations and technical experts. Anchored in the country's legal and policy framework and international commitments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the assessment provides an evidence-based platform for discussing issues that are often difficult to address directly, including discriminatory social norms, unequal power relations, household decision-making, inheritance and marriage-related practices and women's participation in community governance.

Through Dimitra Clubs, community representatives bring forward collectively identified priorities and solutions rather than individual views. By fostering dialogue between women and men, the approach also helps build community ownership of reforms and promotes changes in attitudes and

behaviours that support the implementation of women's rights in practice. The approach has also strengthened women's participation in local land governance, including as land mediators and through greater engagement with local authorities and customary institutions. The structured multi-stakeholder dialogue creates opportunities for government institutions, civil society organizations and community representatives to engage around a shared evidence base, supporting constructive dialogue, accountability and joint problem-solving. Bringing together legal analysis with evidence from communities helps identify not only where legal protections exist, but also why implementation gaps persist and what institutional and social changes, including changes in discriminatory gender norms and social expectations, may be needed to ensure that women can effectively exercise their rights in practice.

The experience demonstrates that effective land governance reform requires links between national policy processes and community realities. It also illustrates that legal and policy reforms alone are insufficient if discriminatory social norms remain unchanged. Structured community dialogue, using accessible language and locally grounded gender-transformative approaches that actively engage both women and men, can help shift attitudes and behaviours, strengthen women's empowerment and agency and ensure that reforms are informed by rural women's experiences while implementation challenges are identified and addressed through more inclusive, equitable and responsive approaches.

Enabling institutional pathways: Advancing global norms through national action

The adoption of the Voluntary Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment in the Context of Food Security and Nutrition (VG-GEWGE) in 2023 has created an opportunity to strengthen coherence between SDG monitoring and broader national efforts to advance gender equality across agrifood systems. Although SDG indicator 5.a.2 focuses specifically on the legal and policy framework governing women's equal rights to land and the elimination of discrimination, its implementation requires consideration of these broader dimensions. Assessing whether women enjoy equal land rights requires examining not only land tenure legislation and governance arrangements, but also family relations, inheritance systems, participation in decision-making, access to productive resources and services, institutional capacity, budget allocations, legal awareness and the social norms that influence how rights are exercised in practice and the wider contexts in which land rights are exercised, including situations of conflict, humanitarian crises and food insecurity. These are often the factors that determine whether legal protections translate into meaningful improvements in women's lives. The guidelines provide recommendations across nine interconnected areas, including women's access to and control over resources, leadership and participation, economic and social empowerment, education and capacity development, social protection, the recognition of unpaid care work, the elimination of discrimination and violence and gender equality in situations of conflict and crisis. These global norms are complementary to other SDG indicators in the context of food security and nutrition.

The experiences presented in this paper illustrate how SDG 5.a.2 provides a practical institutional entry point for these broader discussions. For example, in Colombia, successive SDG 5.a.2 assessments provide a framework to examine progress within a complex land governance system, including the implementation of rural land reforms, women's participation in land-related decision-making and access to productive resources. The assessment also connects with broader gender equality policies, including the national care policy, which recognizes the contribution of rural women's unpaid care work to food production, natural resource management and rural livelihoods.

Rather than operating as separate processes, implementation of SDG 5.a.2 and the VG-GEWGE can therefore be mutually reinforcing. SDG 5.a.2 provides a nationally owned, evidence-based process for assessing legal and policy frameworks, combining legal analysis with evidence from indicators such as SDG 5.a.1 and 1.4.2, convening stakeholders and identifying priorities for reform. The VG-GEWGE provide a normative framework through which these findings can be situated within wider efforts to advance gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment in agrifood systems.

Making intersectional inequality visible: Leave no one behind

A significant contribution of efforts to assess women's land rights has been to make visible how gender inequality interacts with other dimensions of disadvantage. Women's ability to acquire, inherit, access and exercise control over land is not determined by gender alone, but is also shaped by factors such as ethnicity, age, religion, marital status, disability, socio-economic status and membership of customary or Indigenous communities. Legal and policy frameworks need to consider how these intersecting factors influence women's ability to exercise land rights in practice, particularly where statutory, customary and religious systems overlap ([FAO, 2026](#)). For example, widows and women from customary communities may face particular challenges in maintaining land rights following the death of a spouse or when formal legal protections are not effectively implemented ([FAO, 2026](#)).

The SDG 5.a.2 assessment process provides an opportunity for stakeholders to examine these differentiated experiences and move beyond a uniform understanding of women's land rights. The methodology requires consideration of how legal and policy measures affect groups of women who may face discrimination in law or practice linked to ethnicity, age, religion, marital status or other social characteristics, ensuring that assessments identify barriers affecting specific groups rather than treating women as a homogeneous category.

These perspectives can reveal barriers that may not be apparent when assessing legal equality in the abstract, such as discriminatory inheritance practices, disadvantages linked to marital status, or exclusion from land governance institutions. For example, in Costa Rica, consultations undertaken for the country's second SDG 5.a.2 assessment included the Foro Nacional de Mujeres Rurales. Their contributions on the functioning of the land tenure system and the experiences of rural women enriched the contextual analysis of the legal framework and informed the final assessment.

While important gaps remain, including limited availability of disaggregated data beyond sex, processes that combine legal analysis with stakeholder engagement can strengthen understanding of who is excluded and why. By bringing these differentiated experiences into land governance discussions, SDG monitoring processes can contribute to the broader commitment of leaving no one behind and support reforms that respond to the realities of diverse groups of women.

Challenges and remaining gaps

Despite important progress, significant challenges remain in ensuring that evidence on women's land rights translates into sustained policy change and implementation.

- (a) Limited and declining resources remain a major constraint. The SDG 5.a monitoring process is resource and labour-intensive and will require sustained efforts and funding in view of the growing demand from countries for technical support, capacity development and policy engagement.
- (b) Strengthening coordination and institutional capacity requires institutional coordination and sustained investment in national capacity. These coordination mechanisms require time and continued support to become embedded in national systems. This is particularly important as countries manage multiple reporting obligations and competing policy priorities. Ensuring that findings from legal assessments, statistical indicators and stakeholder consultations inform national strategies, budgets and programmes remains an ongoing challenge.
- (c) Stronger integration across gender-responsive SDG indicators is needed. Limited coordination among the monitoring processes for indicators such as SDG 5.1.1, 5.a.1 and 5.a.2 can reduce opportunities to generate a comprehensive understanding of structural inequalities affecting women's rights. Combining evidence on legal frameworks, ownership and tenure outcomes and discriminatory laws and practices can provide a stronger basis for policy design, monitoring and accountability. Greater alignment and sustained investment in stronger linkages among government institutions, United Nations agencies, regional bodies and development partners would also improve data availability, comparability and the efficient use of existing investments. Moreover, experiences from initiatives such as the JP RWEE, Dimitra Clubs and implementation of VG-GEWGE demonstrate that legal and policy reforms related to SDG 5.a are more effective when complemented by efforts to strengthen women's participation, awareness raising, collective action, access to productive resources and services and institutional transformation within the agrifood systems. This highlights the importance of stronger linkages and concerted action across gender-responsive SDG targets and indicators, taking into account the specific realities of agrifood systems, to address the multiple and interconnected barriers faced by rural women.
- (d) Implementation gaps remain between legal recognition and women's lived realities. Women's land rights are shaped by the interaction of formal laws, customary and religious systems, family relations, social norms and institutional capacity. Women's experiences are not homogeneous: intersecting characteristics such as marital status, age, ethnicity, religion, disability, location and socio-economic conditions can influence women's ability

to claim and exercise land rights. Ensuring that monitoring and policy responses reflect these differentiated experiences remains essential to leaving no one behind.

Recommendations to the expert group meeting and the Secretary-General's report for the seventy-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women

- (i) Position SDG 5.a.2 as an evidence-to-action mechanism. The assessment process should continue to be used not only to measure legal progress, but also as a platform for policy dialogue, institutional coordination and identification of reform priorities. Findings should be systematically linked to national gender equality strategies, land policies, agricultural programmes and follow-up actions under CEDAW. In particular, SDG 5.a.2 data collection and validation processes can directly support CEDAW reporting by providing structured evidence on legal provisions, implementation gaps and discriminatory barriers affecting women's land rights.
- (ii) Strengthen links between SDG monitoring and broader gender equality commitments. The findings from SDG 5.a.2 should be considered alongside SDG 5.1.1 and 5.a.1, as well as evidence generated through national consultations and women's organizations, to provide a more complete picture of both legal commitments and outcomes. This integrated approach can support accountability and more targeted responses to structural inequalities.
- (iii) Expand coordinated, cross-sector approaches. Models such as the JP RWEE demonstrate the value of linking land rights with livelihoods, food security and nutrition, social protection and resilience-building. Similar integrated approaches can help ensure that legal recognition of women's rights translates into meaningful improvements in women's agency and economic empowerment.
- (iv) Build on participatory approaches that strengthen women's voice and agency. Experiences from Dimitra Clubs and other community-based initiatives show the importance of creating spaces where rural women can identify barriers, participate in decision-making and influence local governance. By addressing the social norms and power dynamics that often prevent women from fully realizing their rights, these approaches complement legal and institutional reforms and help translate rights into meaningful outcomes.
- (v) Secure sustained, multi-year financing for assessment, follow-up and implementation. Long-term financing is needed to maintain technical capacity, support country processes, strengthen national institutions and enable implementation of recommendations emerging from assessments. Moving beyond reporting requires resources for policy dialogue, capacity development, awareness-raising and partnerships with women's organizations and local actors.