

# Preliminary Findings from the Strategic Merger Assessment of UNFPA and UN Women

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## PURPOSE AND SCOPE

1. Under the UN80 initiative, the Secretary-General requested an assessment '*of the benefits of a merger of UNFPA and UN Women and their respective mandates to create a unified voice and platform on gender equality and women's rights*'. It examines whether a merger between the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) could strengthen the United Nations system's capacity to deliver on existing intergovernmental commitments relating to gender equality, women's empowerment, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. The assessment responds to a structural question, not an institutional performance gap. Both entities continue to deliver important results within their respective mandates. However, the geopolitical, operational and financing environment in which these mandates are implemented has shifted materially, creating growing pressure on institutional arrangements developed in a different context.

2. The purpose is to conduct a thorough assessment of the benefits of creating a unified voice and platform to strengthen the United Nations system's ability to translate globally agreed commitments into consistent and scalable results for women, girls and youth across development, humanitarian and peace contexts. The assessment draws on analysis of institutional mandates, operational models, financial structures and system roles, with due consideration given to the feedback from consultations with Member States, civil society and other stakeholders. It provides an analytical

foundation for assessing how structural change could strengthen coherence, accountability and delivery relative to the continuation of existing arrangements.

3. Preliminary findings indicate that a merger is technically feasible under clearly defined safeguards and disciplined sequencing. Among the structural approaches to a merger examined, the assessment identifies a composite entity model as the most viable pathway to combine integration with continuity safeguards. The purpose of this brief is to present the preliminary findings to support continued dialogue with Member States.

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## STRATEGIC AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

4. The mandates anchored in the Beijing Platform for Action, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) are the internationally agreed foundations for advancing gender equality, women's empowerment and sexual and reproductive health and rights. The institutional architecture through which these commitments are implemented has evolved over several decades, with UNFPA focusing on population dynamics and sexual and reproductive health and rights, and UN Women advancing gender equality through normative leadership, system coordination and operational engagement.

5. Together, these institutions contribute across a wide continuum of functions that include global

norms and standards, demographic analysis and population data systems, policy engagement with governments, system-wide accountability mechanisms, national institutional reform and operational programme delivery in development and humanitarian settings. While these roles are complementary and mutually reinforcing, they operate through separate governance arrangements, operational models and funding streams.

6. The context in which these mandates are implemented has changed significantly. Political contestation around gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights has intensified in both multilateral and national arenas. At the same time, humanitarian needs affecting women and girls continue to rise, particularly in contexts affected by conflict, displacement and climate-related shocks. These developments place increasing demands on the institutions responsible for supporting governments and partners in addressing these challenges.

7. Development financing conditions have also shifted. Both UNFPA and UN Women operate primarily through voluntary contributions in an environment characterized by high levels of earmarking and significant donor concentration. In parallel, broader United Nations reform efforts emphasize stronger system coherence, clearer accountability and more integrated delivery at country level. Within this evolving context, the effectiveness of existing institutional arrangements in translating global commitments into tangible results requires continued examination.

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## IMPLICATIONS OF THE CURRENT INSTITUTIONAL CONFIGURATION

8. The forthcoming assessment is premised on a detailed analysis of the mandates, strategic positioning and operational models of both entities [available here](#). This analysis confirms that UNFPA and UN Women perform distinct but complementary roles within the United Nations system. UNFPA combines normative authority with large-scale operational delivery in areas including sexual and reproductive health services, gender-based

violence prevention and response, humanitarian programming and population data systems. UN Women operates through a triple mandate encompassing normative leadership, system-wide coordination and operational programming aimed at advancing gender equality and women's empowerment, with its programmatic footprint focusing on strengthening women's economic empowerment, women's leadership, ending violence against women and humanitarian action/women, peace and security.

9. In practice, functional overlap between the two entities is limited. Most results are achieved through parallel and complementary engagement rather than substitution. This specialization has enabled depth of expertise and operational capacity in areas central to each mandate.

10. At the same time, the analysis highlights several structural implications of the current configuration. The mandates together span the continuum from global norms and accountability to national systems, policy reform and operational service delivery. In practice, however, these functions operate through separate institutional frameworks. As a result, the realization of end-to-end impact for women, girls and youth depends heavily on sustained coordination across institutional boundaries rather than unified institutional accountability. Therefore gaps remain between the realization of reforms and the enhancement of programme delivery in-country.

11. External partners and stakeholders often engage with multiple United Nations entities to advance interconnected objectives rather than interacting with a single institutional counterpart, raising transaction costs for governments and limiting overall impact. In politically contested environments, greater institutional scale and clarity of mandate can positively influence negotiating leverage and political voice. Moreover, this could mean greater access for civil society, including women's rights groups, through a large platform with dedicated capacity to engage with an increased number of networks. The distribution of closely related mandates across separate institutions may therefore affect the system's ability to provide strengthened, coherent support to governments and partners.

12. Oversight observations across the UN development system, including from the Joint Inspection Unit and other review bodies, have highlighted governance complexity, fragmented accountability arrangements and areas requiring strengthened risk management and results reporting. These observations reinforce the structural question of whether current institutional configurations are optimally designed to deliver coherent, end-to-end impact in an increasingly demanding and scrutinized environment.

13. These structural dynamics do not undermine the effectiveness of either institution individually. However, under current geopolitical and financing conditions, they may increasingly constrain the system's ability to translate global commitments into consistent and visible results. The assessment, therefore, examines whether a merger could strengthen coherence, institutional weight and delivery capacity while preserving existing mandates and operational strengths. It sets out a vision for a stronger and more coordinated entity delivering support and strengthening partnerships in support of women, girls and youth.

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## STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES ASSOCIATED WITH INTEGRATION

14. If undertaken under explicit safeguards, a merger could offer several potential strategic opportunities. A unified institutional framework could bring together normative leadership on gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, system-wide coordination functions, demographic expertise and operational delivery capacity within a single governance structure. Such an arrangement could strengthen accountability across the full results continuum, linking global commitments more directly to national implementation and humanitarian response.

15. Institutional scale also carries importance in politically contested environments. A consolidated entity could provide governments, civil society organizations and other relevant stakeholders with a clearer institutional counterpart while strengthening the United Nations' capacity to support agreed

commitments and provide expertise in policy areas deemed sensitive. A merger could also enable closer alignment between demographic analysis, life-course programming and gender equality policies at a time when population dynamics and gender equality increasingly intersect in global policy debates. It would create more joint scalable funding platforms by providing a single vehicle to direct funding to both mandates.

16. At the operational level, closer institutional integration could contribute to stronger alignment between humanitarian, peace and security, development and normative functions. Within evolving work on the configuration of United Nations Country Teams under the UN80 Initiative, a consolidated entity combining gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and population expertise could support more integrated engagement with governments and national partners. It could enable stronger humanitarian responses, through combining gender-based violence (GBV) prevention, reproductive health services and women's leadership in crisis contexts and recovery efforts through a unified response. For countries, this could mean receiving a full complement of support from the UN in one cohesive package – bringing together support for: gender budgeting; data-informed, gender responsive policy; enhanced labour force participation; and programming to support future generations of women leaders. The expanded physical footprint means more support reaching women, girls and youth. The objective of integration would therefore be to strengthen coherence and institutional resilience rather than to pursue short-term cost reductions.

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## RISKS AND MITIGATION CONSIDERATIONS

17. The assessment identifies several risks associated with merging. These risks are material but manageable if addressed through careful design and sequencing. The most sensitive risk concerns the protection of mandates. In the current geopolitical environment, institutional restructuring could create opportunities for attempts to narrow or reinterpret agreed commitments. Safeguarding

the integrity of mandates anchored in the ICPD Programme of Action, the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW, therefore, represents a foundational condition for any future institutional configuration.

18. A second set of risks relates to operational continuity during transition. A merger could introduce disruption to programmes, systems integration challenges and workforce adjustments. Phased sequencing and explicit operational safeguards are essential to ensure continuity of delivery. Particular care would be required to ensure continuity of life-saving sexual and reproductive health services, gender-based violence prevention and response, women, peace and security programming, funding to civil society and women's rights movements, humanitarian coordination functions, normative support to Member States and population data systems. Phased sequencing and explicit operational safeguards would therefore be essential to ensure continuity of delivery.

19. A third risk concerns potential funding volatility. Both entities operate in a funding environment characterized by high levels of earmarking and donor concentration. Institutional restructuring could introduce uncertainty among financing partners if mandates or operational arrangements appear unclear. Transparent communication with donors, explicit mandate continuity and dedicated transition financing would therefore be important to sustain predictable resource flows.

20. The assessment also considers the risks associated with maintaining the status quo. Under sustained political and financial pressure, structural fragmentation may gradually constrain institutional influence, scale and coherence. Feasibility must therefore be assessed relative to alternative risk profiles of status quo versus a merger, rather than between risk on one hand and stability on the other.

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## COMPOSITE ENTITY PATHWAY

21. Among the structural approaches examined, the composite entity model offers a balanced pathway that combines institutional merging with continuity safeguards. While each approach presents potential

advantages and risks, the composite model performs comparatively well against key feasibility criteria, including protection of mandates, continuity of operations, political acceptability and transition risk. It signals parity of mandates and a coming together of institutional strengths within a unified framework, while allowing integration to proceed progressively through sequenced transitional arrangements that minimize disruption to programmes and partnerships. A composite entity would strengthen delivery by bringing together normative leadership, policy engagement and operational capacity within a single institutional framework. At the country level, this would enable integrated programmes spanning legal reform, institutional strengthening and service delivery. Governments would engage a single UN partner supporting gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, and population dynamics, reducing fragmentation and accelerating implementation.

22. From a financial perspective, the assessment includes a preliminary cost-benefit analysis based on indicative assumptions. The analysis suggests that merging could generate recurring annual efficiencies in the range of approximately USD 32–38 million once integration is fully implemented, primarily through consolidation of overlapping administrative and support functions across headquarters, regional and country levels. One-time transition costs are preliminarily estimated in the range of approximately USD 56–110 million, reflecting workforce alignment, systems integration, governance harmonization, change management and temporary dual-running arrangements during transition. Under the current assumptions, recurring efficiencies could offset transition costs over a medium-term horizon. However, the financial case is not presented as the primary rationale for reform; rather, potential efficiencies would need to be reinvested to strengthen delivery capacity and support mandate implementation within a consolidated institutional framework.

23. The composite model draws on precedents within the United Nations system where institutional consolidation has been implemented through sequenced transitional arrangements designed to protect mandate integrity and operational continuity.

As both UNFPA and UN Women are subsidiary organs of the General Assembly, any structural change would ultimately require authorization by the General Assembly.

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## **POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS**

24. The assessment provides an analytical basis for further consideration. Should Member States wish to explore the integration pathway further, further information on operational design could be provided, including governance arrangements, leadership structures, operational safeguards and transition sequencing. Continued engagement with Member States, financing partners and civil society stakeholders would also be essential to sustain confidence and ensure that any future reform strengthens the system's capacity to deliver for women, girls and youth.