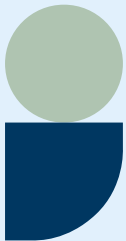




UNITED NATIONS  
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**UNU-IIGH**  
International Institute  
for Global Health



## WHAT WORKS

# IN GENDER AND HEALTH IN THE UNITED NATIONS

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### CASE STUDY 14:

Improved institutional and programmatic gender mainstreaming through increased participation in the Gender Equality Seal (UNDP)

Gender &  
Health Hub

Knowledge. Policy. Action.



# Project summary

The United Nations University International Institute for Global Health (UNU-IIGH) co-produced a practice-based study with five UN agencies working in global health (UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO). The project focused on analysing and understanding what worked, where, for whom, why and how, institutionally and programmatically, to successfully mainstream gender ([click here for the consolidated project report](#)).

The research involved in-depth analyses of 14 case studies that were considered examples of successful gender mainstreaming identified by respective UN agencies. Interview and published material relevant to each case study were analysed to ascertain the factors contributing to successful gender mainstreaming within the UN system. Key findings of the project included:

- Leaders can catalyse, accelerate and sustain success, by investing in gender architecture across the organisation with dedicated core funds.
- Organisational strategies that include gender equality with measurable outcome and output indicators, links between gender teams and budget planning teams, and strong performance and financial accountability mechanisms were gamechangers.
- Feminist civil society expertise and pressure can ensure alignment with local priorities, grounding in ethical frameworks, external accountability and sustainability.
- Joint interagency collaboration can have real impacts on the ground when comparative advantages of the agencies involved are leveraged.
- Evidence, data and programmatic learning that shows what works (and what the problem is) can drive action and change.

## Overview of Case Study Series

This Case Study Series consists of briefs for each of the 14 successful cases of programmatic and institutional gender mainstreaming analysed as part of the 'What Works' project. Each brief presents further details about the particular case study, including the outcomes achieved, the pre-existing contextual factors that enabled the change, the factors that triggered change, and the mechanisms that sustained the change over time. Broadly, the case studies are categorised into three groups based on the types of successful outcomes achieved namely those that:

1. empowered women and girls to resist harmful gender norms and practices and advocate for their own health needs;
2. put gender and health issues on the global agenda; or
3. embedded gender equality issues in institutional processes and structures that supported gender equality in health programming.

These three types of outcomes reflect the different levels that UN agencies work on and illustrate the capabilities and strengths of the UN system.

# Case study 14: Background

This case study, which relates to the third outcome group, focuses on the contributions of UNDP to support institutional and programmatic gender mainstreaming through the implementation of the Gender Equality Seal.

The Gender Equality Seal which was pioneered in Latin America in 2009 with UNDP's support, is a corporate certification programme that recognises the performance of institutions in delivering on gender equality and women's empowerment<sup>1,2</sup>. The Gender Equality Seal certification is one of the main instruments to enhance country office synergies between institutional and programmatic gender mainstreaming to ensure collective action, including monitoring and accountability for advancing gender equality. Country offices receive a bronze, silver or gold seal, which is a "quality guarantee" of good performance, according to the established standards for gender equality.

The Gender Equality Seal has been successfully implemented in all regions of UNDP operation, and since 2011, 79 country offices have been awarded a seal<sup>3,4,5</sup>. This process has enabled many offices to be more gender-responsive through gender analyses and increased allocation of funds for integrating gender into country-level programmes.

The Gender Equality Seal is a successful example of institutional innovation towards gender equality and women's empowerment. Interim outcomes include:

- increased and prioritised programmes for gender equality and women's empowerment programmes;
- gender analyses that inform and contribute to gender-responsive programming;
- increased allocation of funds for gender equality programming;
- staff awareness, understanding and engagement on issues of gender equality and women's empowerment; and
- strengthened partnerships<sup>3,4,5</sup>.

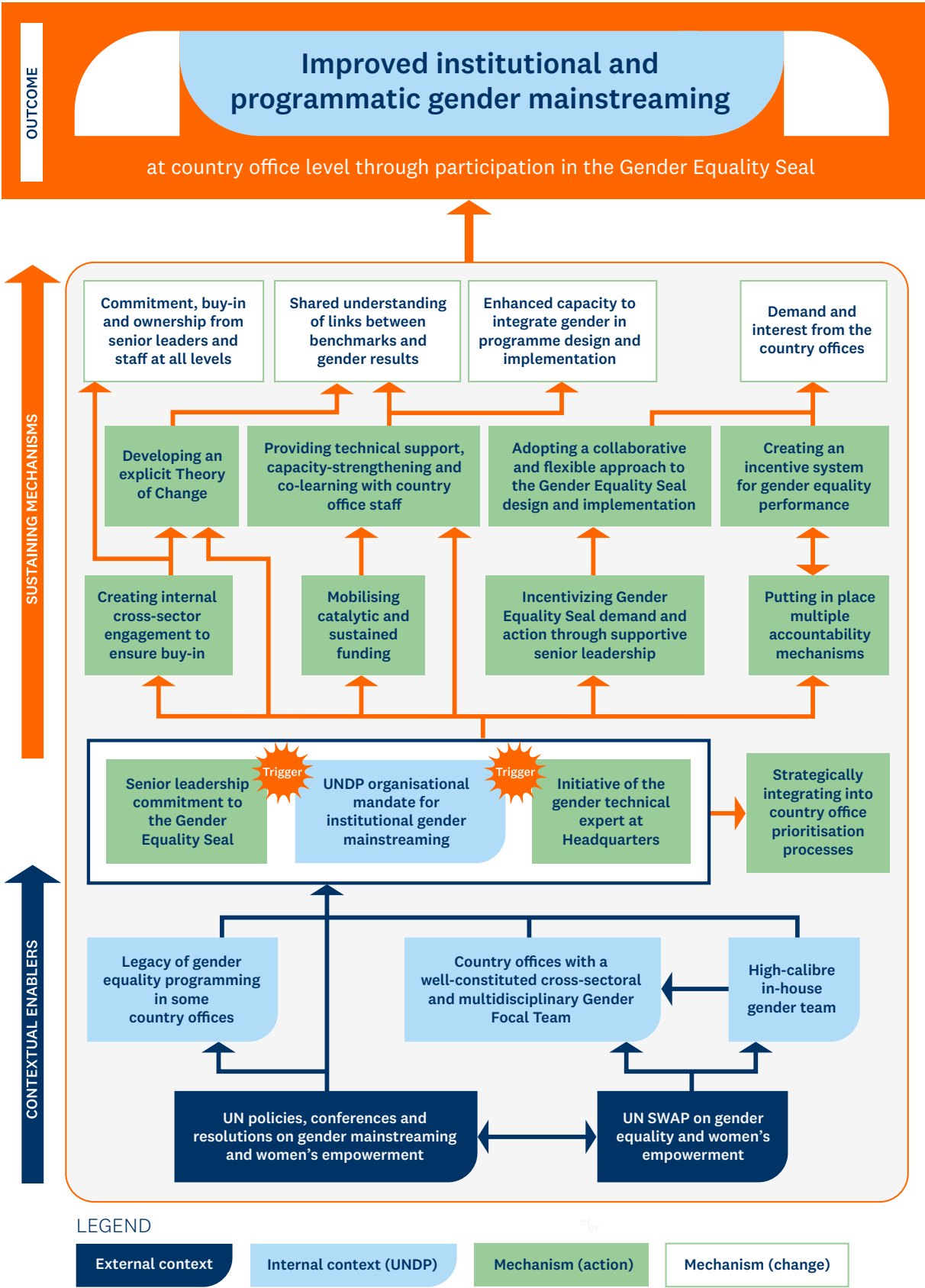
Figure 1 provides an overview of the mechanisms and contextual factors that triggered, enabled and sustained changes that led to the successful adoption and implementation of the Gender Equality Seal in all UNDP regions of operation.

## What were the triggers that led to the implementation of the Gender Equality Seal in UNDP regions?

By triggers, we refer to catalytic moments, usually a combination of changes in an organisation's internal or external environment, including the response of actors who then leverages these to begin to drive change. In the context of this case, the triggers were:

**UNDP organisational mandate for institutional gender mainstreaming.** UNDP has an organisational mandate for gender equality and women's empowerment through its Strategic Plans (2008–2013) and most recent Gender Equality Strategies (GES) (2018–2021)<sup>6,7,8</sup>.

**FIGURE 1. Overview of the triggers, contextual enablers and sustaining mechanisms for improved institutional and programmatic gender mainstreaming through increased participation in the Gender Equality Seal (UNDP country offices)**



The 2008–2013 GES for instance was catalytic in promoting institutional standards, processes, and incentives related to advancing gender equality institutionally this includes the Gender Steering Implementation Committee, the Gender Marker, and revisions to Annual Results-Oriented Annual Reporting, the Gender Parity Strategy and strengthening of the gender architecture<sup>8</sup>.

**The initiative of the gender technical expert at Headquarters.** The idea of the Gender Equality Seal was proposed and led by the Gender Advisor for Institutional Effectiveness, who was a member of Gender Team at headquarters for more than 2 years<sup>9</sup>. The

gender technical expert was recruited while she was in Spain and had prior experience with UNDP leading the regional initiative “America Latina Genera”<sup>6</sup>.

**Senior leadership commitment to the Gender Equality Seal.** There was strong commitment and support from the Associate Administrator for the Gender Equality Seal, and they secured internal support for its piloting and roll-out<sup>10</sup>. Successive Directors of the Gender Team at headquarters were committed to gender equality and women’s empowerment, helping to mobilise internal political support, and allocate funding to hire a feminist gender consultant who contributed to the design and piloting of the tool<sup>10</sup>.

## What enabling contextual factors facilitated change?

The initial triggers occurred in a broader enabling context at various levels including across the UN system and at UNDP headquarter and country office levels.

At the UN system-wide level, enabling contextual factors included:

- The enabling commitment through various policies among the Member States following UN resolutions and conferences, affirmed by the UN Economic and Social Council resolution on gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment (for example, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1979, Beijing Conference in 1995, the Millennium Development Goals in 2000)<sup>11,12,13</sup>.
- The UN system strategic guidance frameworks, such as the 2012 UN-System Wide Action Plan (UN-SWAP), which is committed to gender mainstreaming, gender equality and women’s empowerment within UN agencies<sup>14</sup>.

Within the UNDP, some of the important enabling contextual factors were:

- The presence of a high-calibre Gender Team at headquarters who had expertise in human rights and social science, as well as a strong background working with community service organisations (CSOs) and women's movements<sup>10</sup>.
- A legacy of gender equality programming or initiatives in some country offices, for example, Argentina, Costa Rica. This included committed funds for example, cost-sharing with the government, that catalysed or accelerated efforts to gender transformative results<sup>10</sup>.
- Country offices that had well-constituted cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary gender focal teams, or even dedicated non-gender staff, with adequate investment and training to successfully integrate gender dimensions using existing UNDP technical tools and resources<sup>10</sup>.

# What actions helped institutionalise the Gender Equality Seal in country offices?

**Creating internal cross-sector engagement to ensure buy-in.** From the start, the gender technical expert and Gender Team were committed to ensuring shared ownership and buy-in of the Gender Equality Seal among all staff at headquarters<sup>10</sup>. Over two years, there was sustained cross-sector and unit engagement through participatory workshops and meetings with staff<sup>10</sup>. These engagements identified key entry points for each programme priority area, incentives to enable country office participation, and benchmarks to assess country office practice and processes around gender equality and women's empowerment. Beyond the shared understanding that the Gender Equality Seal was an institutional process and a corporate initiative, the dialogues also secured buy-in from senior management of multiple bureaus, particularly the associate Administrator<sup>10</sup>.

**Mobilising catalytic and sustained funding.** There has been a growth in internally mobilised core resources, reflecting the degree of senior leaders' political commitment and guarantee of the Gender Equality Seal's institutionalisation, especially in the context of cuts in donor funding. The gender technical expert at headquarters leveraged support and buy-in from senior leadership to secure catalytic funds and expand core resources for the Gender Equality Seal programme. The senior leadership support and funding enabled the recruitment of an external feminist gender adviser and the piloting of the Gender Equality Seal in three other countries—Kyrgyzstan, Bhutan, and Argentina<sup>10,15</sup>. The Gender Seal standards was designed by the Gender Team at headquarters under the leadership of the gender technical advisor for institutional effectiveness. An external advisor was part of the core team which designed the programme, and this external support was fundamental to the Gender Seal process<sup>10,15</sup>.

## **Developing an explicit theory of change.**

The Gender Equality Seal had clear benchmarks for gender equality and women's empowerment with an explicit theory of change or pathway of change narrative<sup>a</sup>. The clarity of the benchmarks enabled senior management, programme managers and country office staff to connect institutional change with gender programmatic results. Country offices that performed poorly against these benchmarks, were considered not to have succeeded in tackling gender inequalities in the workplace or programmes<sup>15</sup>.

## **Providing technical support, capacity strengthening and co-learning with country office staff.**

The Gender Equality Seal has a dedicated secretariat with committed staff who provide technical support to country offices throughout the certification process — from self-assessment vis-a-vis Gender Equality Seal benchmarks to developing action plans<sup>10</sup>. Gender technical experts have consistently provided training to strengthen capacity on gender equality and women's empowerment. For example, in 2019, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Gender Equality Seal Team delivered more than 15 virtual workshops. They also facilitated ten small-group deep dives on integrating gender in programming, communication, and knowledge management to achieve transformative results within UNDP and the Member States<sup>4</sup>. Capacity building and training initiatives with country office staff, facilitated by internal and external gender experts and characterised by a constant reflective learning process incorporating key learning on gender equality into country office practice and processes, have often led to transformation<sup>10,15</sup>. Such an action-oriented and co-learning approach has enabled staff to identify best practices and implementation gaps as well as potential alliances and opportunities for collaboration<sup>10,15</sup>. In addition, the Gender Team leveraged these capacity

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a. Country office senior managers understood that to make progress or accelerate gains on GEWE, they would need to invest in creating an enabling internal organisational workplace and in tracking and measuring gender transformations in seven interrelated areas: 1) management systems, 2) building in-house capacities, 3) creating enabling environments, 4) communication and knowledge management, 5) programmes, 6) partnerships, and 7) gender equality impacts and results.

activities to reinforce staff and country office buy-in and ownership of the Gender Equality Seal certification process<sup>10,15</sup>.

**Adopting a collaborative and flexible approach to the Gender Equality Seal design and implementation.** The Gender and Gender Equality Seal team took a centralised yet engaging and collaborative approach, moving from the traditional top-down approach to a participatory management strategy. The initial pilot had shown that when interactions, including assessments and technical support to offices, were participatory and coordinated between the headquarters, regional gender advisers and country office staff, trust was built, and relationships leveraged to move the Gender Equality Seal process forward<sup>10,15</sup>. Staff in country offices often felt supported through each certification process<sup>10,15</sup>. Recognising the differences in resources (for example, finance, staff) and experiences (for example, crises), the Gender Equality Seal Team took a flexible approach, by adapting the Gender Equality Seal's standards based on the country office operational environment<sup>10</sup>. Though each entry pathway—bronze, silver, or gold—towards country office certification was timebound, these were not set in stone. Where required, extensions were provided, which enabled country offices to meet benchmarks while addressing critical and pressing priorities appropriately. Even without a formal application to participate, experience indicated that this flexibility allowed country offices to pilot the Gender Equality Seal to assess their capacity to deliver before seeking formal certification<sup>10</sup>.

Because participation in the Gender Seal was voluntary and not imposed by UNDP headquarters, this feature seems to have contributed to the Seal's appeal in country offices and among staff<sup>16</sup>. Also, the certification was embraced as a process that recognised a participating country office's progress on attaining transformative gender results. The choice to allow regional bureaus and country offices to decide whether to participate had been one of the incentives that triggered the increasing enrolment of countries in the Gender Equality Seal initiative, which contrasted with approaches of sanctions for non-compliance<sup>16</sup>.

### **Incentivising Gender Equality Seal demand and action through supportive senior leadership.**

Senior leadership commitment remained firm, sustaining the roll out of the Gender Equality Seal. UNDP's Administrator, a champion of the Gender Equality Seal, launched each round of calls for applications and chaired the Gender Equality Seal's awards ceremony<sup>10</sup>. The calls were subsequently circulated from the Administrator through the network of Resident Representatives to country offices senior leadership. The latter's support and commitment for gender equality and women's empowerment facilitated country office enrolment in the Gender Equality Seal. This strategy was reported as being the "crucial difference"<sup>15</sup>, which reiterated corporate support and ensured that COs were responsive, mitigating the gender and Gender Equality Seal team's burden to convince countries to participate.

**Strategically integrating into country office prioritisation processes.** Progress and success occurred when the Gender Equality Seal was regarded as a priority rather than an add-on to daily tasks in country offices<sup>10</sup>. The experience in Egypt showed that, when applied in an integrated rather than as a standalone initiative, the Gender Equality Seal was an effective tool which enabled significant improvements and cross-programme learning to mainstream gender equality and empower women<sup>16</sup>.

**Putting in place multiple accountability mechanisms.** By design, the responsibility for ensuring accountability and oversight of country office progress stood with senior management, some of whom also acted as the office's gender focal team head<sup>10,15</sup>. Country office requests to enrol in the Gender Equality Seal emanated from its senior leadership rather than gender teams<sup>b</sup>. While this may not always have led to gender prioritisation, the experience showed that when successful it enabled senior leaders to commit to gender equality and women's empowerment through mobilising resources, securing internal buy-in and ownership from staff, and facilitating healthy positive competition among senior managers across country offices<sup>10,15</sup>.

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**b.** The Seal has leadership benchmark to track whether senior managers performance reviews include their contribution to gender equality. However, reporting on this is not mandatory which may hinder actions from incentivising them.

Furthermore, an independent review prior to certification was integrated into the process and conducted by a team of assessors comprising staff from the headquarters Gender and Gender Equality Seal teams as well as external consultants. For Gold certification, country offices needed to score at least 80% to qualify for a gold assessment mission<sup>17</sup>. These appraisal missions enabled UNDP to verify evidence, establish the level of certification of the country office, open meaningful dialogue on gender equality with the country office, and consolidate learning from the experience of the certification process. By design, these certifications are only transitional<sup>c</sup>. The limited time-related validity ensured that country offices build upon gains and accelerate actions towards more sustainable results for gender equality and women's empowerment<sup>10,15</sup>.

**Creating an incentivising system for gender equality performance.** A public incentive system was intentionally incorporated as an integral component of the Gender Equality Seal certification process<sup>15</sup>. The biannual Gender Equality Seal Award ceremony, hosted at UNDP headquarters and chaired by the Administrator, celebrates and makes visible the work and commitment of key staff (for example, the country office representative, gender specialists, gender focal point teams) and demonstrates the value of gender equality within UNDP country offices. This public recognition system has had the added value of reinforcing country offices buy-in and mobilising public support for institutionalising gender equality benchmarks in organisational practices<sup>10,15</sup>.

## Conclusion

This case study illustrates the organisational-wide change that is possible at country level when gender equality is embedded in institutional processes and structures and the positive impact this can have on gender mainstreaming at the organisational level and in health programmes. This brief, alongside analyses of the other case studies within the What Works in Gender and

Health Case Study Series, fills a major gap at a critical juncture in time by providing an evidence-base of what has worked, where, for whom, why and how, to promote gender equality in health in a multilateral system. For further details of consolidated findings across all 14 case studies and overall recommendations please [click here for the full project report](#).

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<sup>c</sup> Bronze and Silver are expected to build on achievement towards Gold certification. Gold Seals are valid for 3 years and countries must apply for re-certification.



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