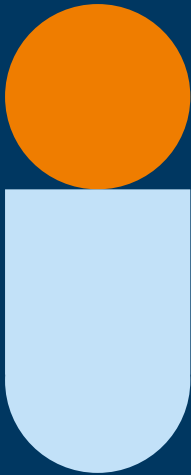




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THINK PIECE SERIES 2022

THE POWER OF...
THE COLLECTIVE

**Collective Power for
Gender Equality:**

An Unfinished Agenda for the UN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gender inequality remains a major global affliction with detrimental lifelong and intergenerational health, social, and economic consequences. Meaningfully addressing gender inequalities requires collective and intersectional action across many boundaries, including organisational, sectoral, and geographical ones. The United Nations (UN), with its global mission and reach, working across multiple sectors through its agencies, is well placed to use its collective power to advance gender equality. Although the UN has contributed towards strides in advancing gender equality over the last 25 years, in the current context of rising authoritarianism, the backlash against gender equality, and growing patriarchal nationalism, there is an urgency for the UN to more effectively use its collective power to tackle gender inequalities.

This think piece critically questions whether the benefits and results of current approaches to UN coordination for gender equality are commensurate with the amount of time, energy and funds invested. The authors ask how a shift in mindset – taking into account feminist notions of collective power – could help transform the way the UN thinks, acts and invests in coordination for gender equality. The paper explores three areas: (1) insights and lessons learned about the factors that support and impede the UN’s collective power on gender equality; (2) how feminist thinking about collaboration and collective power could enhance the UN’s approach to coordination; and (3) changing structures and incentives for supporting greater collective power and action on gender equality.

In the paper, the authors identify factors that advance and impede collective impact on gender equality in the UN:

Enabling factors for coordinated action

- + **A shared vision shaped by a significant range of stakeholders**, including governments, civil society organisations, women’s rights networks, private-sector partners, academic organisations and UN organisations.
- + **Pooling non-financial UN resources** to establish minimum performance standards on gender equality.
- + **Dedicated resources for coordinated action on gender equality**, which catalyse action on every issue in the UN, including gender equality.

Barriers to collective action

- **The pay-to-play approach**, whereby competition for funds discourages collaboration as agencies jockey to prove their value to donors.
- **Size and status matter more than expertise**, resulting in the exclusion of smaller agencies and teams with the critical technical expertise needed to meaningfully advance work on gender equality.
- **Follow the leader**, whereby notions of oneness – one programme, one leader, one budgetary framework, and one office – contradict evidence from feminist action which showcases the importance of shared leadership, consensus, healthy debate, and collective action to advance gender equality.
- **The high cost of coordination**, given the different accounting systems, rules, and organisational cultures across UN agencies.
- **The UN as a members-only club**, frequently excluding non-UN local and national partners (e.g. feminist civil society groups and women’s networks) who deeply understand the work and drive change on the ground.

The authors detail how UN coordination for gender equality could benefit enormously from feminist thinking and action about collaboration and collective power. They go on to explain that the UN could place greater emphasis on the power of the collective (*power with*) and a common purpose (*power to*) to focus on areas where collective action has unique value, prioritising outcomes instead of performative aspects of coordination. The literature on collective impact shows that large-scale social change comes from better cross-sector coordination rather than from the isolated interventions of individual organisations. The UN needs to strengthen its capacity to fully commit to collective action and impact, including notions of a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a robustly-resourced support organisation (UN Women) serving as a backbone, along with an expanded web of advisors and teams for gender equality across the various UN agencies, dedicated to aligning and motivating work on gender.

The authors end by presenting five ideas for centring and strengthening collective action on gender equality in the UN:

(1) Reframe notions of top-down coordination. Collective power and action require a more horizontal and synergistic approach. UN staff designated as leads for gender equality who have the knowledge, experience and networks to add value, also need substantive skills and a toolbox for facilitating collective action.

(2) Re-think notions of inclusion with respect to leaving no one behind in the composition of inter-agency groups or other mechanisms for collective action. Too often, coordination initiatives direct a disproportionate amount of energy and resources to UN organisations rather than to the national and local partners they are meant to benefit.

(3) Re-prioritise what aspects of the UN’s work on gender equality require a collective approach. A more specific set of criteria is needed to help assess when comprehensive UN coordination is required or whether resources simply need to be assigned to those with the greatest expertise to “just do it!”

(4) Resource the UN’s backbone for gender equality to build a world class gender architecture. UN Women needs to be fortified, as does the network of gender teams, advisors and specialists across all the UN agencies so they can play the critical role they are mandated to play within and across their organisations. At this moment, the UN is reviewing its gender architecture. This represents an opportunity to examine how re-framing coordination and focusing on collective power and impact, rather than top-down authority, might be a game changer.

(5) Re-negotiate ideas about accountability. The UN often demands accountability from those who support gender-equality initiatives (e.g. gender advisors, gender-theme groups, and gender-equality teams) rather than holding higher-ranked management, who have the greatest power, accountable for failing to dedicate adequate human and financial resources to programmes.

There are many examples of the UN using its collective power to advance gender equality, whether in collective advocacy to end gender-based violence, to shining a light on the profound gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is now an urgency to consolidate evidence from years of experience, include women’s rights and feminist organisations in collective action, and undertake a cost-benefit analysis from a gender and outcome-based perspective. This is a unique opportunity to reframe, re-think, resource, re-prioritise, and re-negotiate past practices, align with feminist principles that highlight collective action and power, and significantly strengthen the resources and voices of leaders for gender equality within and outside the UN.

To read the full think piece, click on [this link](#).