

Summary Report: Joint UNFPA-UN Women Consultation with CSOs on the Merger Assessment, 15 January 2026

This report summarizes the joint consultation with civil society organizations (CSOs) to discuss and seek input into the ongoing assessment of a potential merger between UNFPA and UN Women, as part of the UN80 Initiative proposed by the Secretary-General. The Deputy Secretary-General (DSG) and Executive Directors (ED) of UN Women and UNFPA opened the discussion with a brief overview of the assessment's purpose, principles and priorities before inviting CSO inputs. As the first in a planned series of engagements, this consultation served as a platform for CSOs to share their perspectives, concerns, and recommendations related to the potential merger and the process behind.

Opening the session, the DSG and two EDs expressed concern regarding the stalled progress on SDG 5 and geopolitical pushback, noting that current challenges demand a more coherent transformative UN approach. They described the assessment as a strategic exploration within the UN80 reform process – rather than a cost-cutting measure – aimed at strengthening delivery while protecting mandates, gender equality and SRHR. They underscored that the process is firmly rooted in the ICPD and Beijing frameworks, prioritizing mandate integrity and operational continuity above all. They outlined the process, noting that the assessment, led by an external team and overseen by a high-level Steering Committee, will conclude in early 2026 for Member State decision during the UN General Assembly 2026. They recognized the central role of civil society as catalysts for change, driving accountability and reaffirmed a commitment to transparent, ongoing consultation with civil society partners.

Priorities from CSOs

- 1) Ensure protection of mandates
 - Put concrete measures in place to protect UNFPA's SRHR mandate and UN Women's normative role on gender equality; avoid reopening ICPD and Beijing frameworks given the geopolitical climate of heightened scrutiny, opposition and pushback in multilateralism.
 - Include explicit safeguards in any UNGA resolution to prevent dilution of language, especially SRHR responsibilities, under political pressure.
 - Give due regard within the assessment to granular, operational understanding of how mandates are applied on the ground and in regional standard-setting, not just high-level commitments.
 - Maintain distinct convening spaces with member states for the two mandates.
- 2) Explore alternatives beyond merger
 - Assessment should consider multiple options for coherence and efficiency, not assume merger as the default solution.
 - Frame questions to evaluate risks and benefits of all models, including improved coordination without structural disruption.
- 3) Ensure meaningful civil society engagement in process

- Ensure consultations are meaningful, intergenerational and intersectional, allowing a diversity of CSO voices to be considered in this decision-making.
 - Invite youth-led and grassroots organisations to engage in decision-making spaces, including Executive Boards.
- 4) Interrogate financial risks of merging
 - Analyse potential donor withdrawal and reduced funding for merged entities and weigh against the need for increased funding for gender equality and SRHR.
 - 5) Ensure integration of regional perspectives
 - Integrate regional, sub-regional and sub-national consultations and perspectives, including within Pacific Small Island Developing States, LAC, Africa, and Caribbean; share timelines for regional consultations
 - Strengthen regional capacities to support country-level implementation and uphold SRHR and gender equality commitments.
 - 6) Communicate clearly and transparently on the process
 - Clarify objectives and reasons for the assessment exercise, timelines, perceived risks and benefits and the decision-making process to address trust deficit and perceived opacity.
 - Clarify what plans exist for timely, meaningful civil society participation and input in the UN80 process going forward.
 - 7) Strengthen and safeguard mechanisms engaging civil society and youth
 - Ensure programmes serving marginalised communities and structures engaging civil society and youth are maintained.
 - Retain platforms for youth engagement such as CSW and ICPD youth forums.

Key reflections shared by CSOs

Unclear rationale behind the proposal

- One CSO expressed agreement with the fact that the UN must evolve but questioned whether the proposed merger was the change required.
- Similarly, several CSOs questioned why the process targeted the two UN entities dedicated to gender equality and women's rights, especially when clearer overlaps exist among other UN organizations. Others also noted the relatively small budgets of these two organizations, weakening the economic case for the merger.
- A number of CSOs made reference to the previous Independent Review of the UN System's Capacity to Deliver on Gender Equality which advised against a merger of UNFPA and UN Women for reasons that remain relevant, and one CSO raised the question of what is being asked of this current assessment in terms of what works on the ground.
- Against a backdrop of growing opposition to women's rights, inquiries were raised as to whether efficiency gains was the primary driver of this process.

Concrete measures to safeguard mandates

- Should this proposal proceed to the GA as a resolution, it must be accompanied by specific, concrete measures to ensure the full preservation of existing mandates. One

CSO asked for reflections on what it means in concrete terms that the mandates will remain the same, emphasizing that their real protection will be determined by implementation on the ground - where there is risk of serious erosion.

- One CSO stressed that, amid rising misappropriation of gender and population issues by anti-rights actors, it is vital to retain strong, evidence-based UN entities able to engage authoritatively and help anchor these debates in rights-based positions.

Considerations regarding future structure

- One CSO asked how the assessment will examine how strengthened civil society engagement will feature as an outcome in any future configuration.

Impact of weakened mandates and normative influence for rights-holders

- The most frequently cited theme among CSO comments was of strong caution and concern related to a potential reopening and dilution of both agencies' mandates, with many making reference to the growing pushback. One civil society actor noted that mandate protection will depend on how changes play out in practice, and that differences in how the two agencies operate could lead to backsliding unless implementation details are handled carefully. Another pointed out that it was a much less challenging geopolitical context 15 years ago, when UN Women was created and the resolution was presented in the GA and the environment today is much more volatile.
- Subsuming UNFPA's mandate on SRHR in the broader gender equality agenda could have a devastating impact on women and girls, including on service delivery.
- One CSO described UN Women as a unique institutional entry point for LGBTIQ civil society's access to norm-setting spaces, noting their concerns a merger could reduce this access at a time of intensified backlash.

Financial and Operational Viability

- CSOs warned that, in the current context of shrinking development aid, a merger could further reduce available funding, leading to the question of whether a realistic financial analysis had been conducted to assess this risk.
- Several CSOs expressed concern with merging two such different organizations, with one civil society actor specifically highlighting that the organizations' staff have different skill sets and approaches. It was also noted that lessons should be learned from the 2010-2011 merger of the four existing small gender units into UN Women.
- One CSO posed the question of how much merging the two organizations would cost and how much time would be lost in the transition. The UNFPA Supplies Programme was specifically flagged, with concerns raised as to whether it would be ringfenced and able to continue Phase III as planned.

Process credibility and messaging

- A number of CSOs highlighted what they perceived as inconsistent, merger-centric messaging, raising concerns about predetermined outcomes and unclear underlying motivations. They underscored that the assessment is not framed as an open

exploration of options to improve coordination and coherence, but rather appears to pre-position a merger as the preferred – or assumed – solution.

- With reference to the timelines, little opportunity for input before the report is released and a perception of tokenistic consultations – particularly given that the assessment report will be presented by February/March and regional consultations have not yet been held. Some CSOs raised concerns about the credibility of the process referencing an existing trust deficit being overlooked.

Requests from CSOs

- Circulate notes from this consultation.
- Communicate a clear roadmap for consultations, including regional dialogues and timelines.
- Let civil society know how to engage in the ongoing process, including how to support participation of other civil society organizations in regions and countries.
- Commit to timely sharing of assessment findings with civil society before recommendations go to member states.

Responses from the DSG and EDs

Addressing the concerns raised during the discussion, the leadership categorically affirmed that existing mandates will not be reopened. To ensure this, it was noted that the UN Office of Legal Affairs is involved in the issue of mandate preservation and that lessons from the creation of UN Women are informing the approach. They reiterated a steadfast commitment to safeguarding these mandates across global, regional, and national levels.

A point was made of underscoring that the assessment is still ongoing and that ultimately the decision rests with the Member States while stressing they would not support outcomes that fail to strengthen delivery for women, girls and young people. The operational differences between the two agencies were acknowledged, alongside the need for granular examination in assessing the practical impact of the merger was reiterated.

In relation to civil society engagement, the DSG asked CSO partners to help communicate the UN's intentions clearly at country level. It was underscored that this consultation was one in a series of consultations, highlighting a commitment to better and more frequent communication with civil society partners on the process.