

# A blueprint for UN Women

What does civil society at country  
level expect from the new  
UN women's agency?



## Report

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### List of Abbreviations

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DAW	United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women
EEC	Eastern Europe (non-EU) and Caucasus
GAD	Gender and Development
GEAR	Gender Equality Architecture Reform
INSTRAW	United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women
LAC	Latin American and Caribbean
MDF	MDF Training & Consultancy
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
OSAGI	Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women
ToR	Terms of Reference
UN	United Nations
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
VAW	Violence against Women (in all its forms)
WUNRN	Women's UN Report Programme & Network

### Executive Summary

The foundation of UN Women provides a historic opportunity to transform the lives of women and girls. To deliver results, UN Women must target the most urgent issues for women and absorb the lessons of the past. As it becomes operational, UN Women should build these priorities and new approach into its structures and systems. This report focuses on the views of 100 selected civil society organisations (CSOs) working on women's issues on the ground. It aims to outline the key priorities for UN Women and to propose how the agency should proceed to deliver tangible progress at country level.

#### What should UN Women focus on?

The overwhelming priority that UN Women must address is violence against women (VAW): 99% of respondents said urgent action is needed on this issue and 72% selected it as a top priority for UN Women. Women in all regions suffer multiple forms of violence and 10% of respondents said it is increasing in their countries. All forms of violence against women must be eradicated. But other issues are also important and these are linked. The choice of priorities indicates fundamental gaps regarding the implementation of women's rights at country level. Next to the priority for UN Women, there is a second tier of three issues selected as key priorities. These are women's access to decision-making (42%), access to reliable justice systems (41%) and economic empowerment (41%). A clear overall message from the survey was that there is an urgent need to raise women's awareness of their rights.

#### Who should UN Women focus on?

We asked CSOs for their view on which women need help most urgently and 84% said rural women are the group in greatest need. UN Women should make rural women a priority because they have fewest resources and are least aware of their rights. Our survey found disabled women (61%) and uneducated women (61%) also need urgent attention. The needs of these groups intersect but UN Women should not take a 'one size fits all approach' but tailor specific interventions to target individual groups.

#### How should UN Women operate at country level?

UN Women must be in touch with the needs of women at grassroots. The survey revealed a perception among 30% of CSOs that UN agencies lack knowledge of the daily realities of women on the ground and are not visible to the groups striving for the same goals. There is a strong wish among CSOs to collaborate with the UN as genuine partners: 94% of respondents said they want to work in partnership with UN Women. CSOs have clear ideas as to how this partnership might work: they want UN Women to call on their expert knowledge and to use its access to governments to open up spaces for them to participate in decision-making at national level. Many support UN Women's collaboration with governments: 66% of respondents want UN Women to work with governments but they want it to strive for more independence than UN agencies in the past: more than a quarter (28%) of CSOs said the UN is too close to national governments and many felt this close relationship is hindering progress.

### Recommendations

This survey and report collect the views of civil society on the task ahead for UN Women. The research enables us to formulate some recommendations as to how UN Women should proceed at country level. As it is created, the agency should build its work around the key needs of women:

- VAW must be the main priority for urgent action, directly and as a thematic issue. UNW should work towards a comprehensive action plan to tackle VAW in all its forms, including setting binding targets and timetables, with a specific focus on country level.
- UN Women should focus on rural women and ensure its programmes are tailored to fit specific groups, such as disabled or uneducated women, to maximise impact.
- UN Women should adopt a different approach to working at country level to UN agencies in the past. Its approach should be transformative, leading to actual change. UN Women must develop transparent strategies, and best practices on priorities and key issues highlighted in this survey. These need to be made visible at country level.
- It should engage with civil society as genuine partners at country level, calling on the experience of CSOs and opening spaces for them to participate in decision-making at national level. The creation of UN Women should signal a departure from the practices that left CSOs feeling marginalised in the past.
- UN Women needs to examine its relationships with governments at country level to ensure that governments deliver on their commitments to women's rights. In the past, the way in which the UN has worked with governments has been a source of tension with civil society. UN Women should use its access to governments to open up spaces for CSOs to play a part in strengthening women's rights and promoting gender equality in their countries. Survey participants want UN Women to work with their governments but the new agency should strive for more independence so that progress on women's rights and gender equality remain the key focus of its work.

### Introduction

UN Women has an unprecedented opportunity to speed up progress on gender equality and women's empowerment around the world. While some gains have been made in the past years, huge challenges remain: violence against women in all its forms, the lack of food justice for women, and the lack of gender-responsive policies and practices in all sectors. We know that empowering women and girls is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty and accelerate progress towards all the Millennium Development Goals. We also know that more than 30 years after the UN adopted Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), discrimination against women and girls remains entrenched and pervasive.

In June 2010 governments agreed to establish UN Women by merging four existing gender entities that had responsibility for improving the lives of women but which were having little impact because they were poorly funded and coordinated. The result of a four-year reform of the UN's development system, for the UN Women combines normative policy and programming functions in a single agency. Since January 1 it has begun operating with greater authority and ability than ever before to deliver programmes that can improve women's lives. The fact that UN Women has been established is historic but how it is organised from early on will determine if the agency delivers on its promise to make tangible changes.

The challenge for UN Women is to make a real difference at country level. Its creation must represent a turning point in the way the UN development system works for women and girls. UN Women must address the issues that remain urgent priorities not just by implementing the women's rights and gender equality frameworks already in place but by formulating an approach that takes account of past efforts that have failed to make an impact on the lives of the poorest and most marginalised women.

Civil society at country level, including grassroots and women's organizations, were asked how UN Women must proceed: how it can make most impact at grassroots level and how it can transform gender equality in their countries as well as within the UN system. Their views are contained in this report.

### About the survey

The survey was commissioned by Oxfam Novib and Volunteer Services Overseas (VSO) UK to find out what women want from UN Women at country level: what are their key needs, priorities, aspirations and concerns. We interviewed a wide range of women's and civil society organisations with three main objectives: to provide an overview of the perspectives of women's and civil society organisations (CSOs) on what UN Women needs to do at country level; to find out the experiences of CSOs with the UN at country level to date; to identify the priorities for the implementation of women's rights and gender equality at country level.

For this research, we opted to interview a range of organisations which know the national and local context regarding women's rights, gender equality and the status of women. These include national, local and grassroots-level women's rights groups in addition to organizations who work at national level with core programming on women's rights and gender equality. These stakeholders are important in terms of carrying the work of UN Women at country level and collaborating with UN Women on the implementation of gender justice.



In total, we interviewed 100 CSOs from 75 countries with developing and transitional economies. OECD countries were not included in the survey. For purposes of stratification, the countries were selected from five regional groups. These regional groups were defined on the basis of socioeconomic and cultural similarity, and are not equal to UN definitions of geographic regions (see *Table 1* below for an overview of regions and countries covered by this survey).

The research provides an overview of the needs of women and their organisations as well as the particular challenges they face, and it is particularly relevant for the UN's interventions at country level. Thus, the report and survey are aimed at helping UN Women move in the right direction as it builds up its operational capacity and formulates its approach.

<b>Africa</b> <i>(not including the Maghreb)</i>	<b>Asia</b> <i>(including Pacific Islands and excluding the Middle East)</i>	<b>Eastern Europe and the Caucasus</b> <i>(excluding EU)</i>	<b>Latin America and the Caribbean</b>	<b>Middle-East and Maghreb</b> <i>(including Afghanistan and Pakistan)</i>
(26 countries)	(12 countries)	(11 countries)	(18 countries)	(8 countries)
Benin Burundi Cameroun DR Congo Ethiopia Gambia Ghana Guinea-Conakry Kenya Liberia Malawi Mali Mauritania Mozambique Namibia Niger Nigeria Rwanda Senegal Somalia South Africa Tanzania Chad Togo Zambia Zimbabwe	Bangladesh Cambodia China India Kyrgyzstan Kazakhstan Malaysia Nepal Samoa Sri Lanka Taiwan Tuvalu	Albania Armenia Azerbaijan Bosnia and Herzegovina Croatia Georgia Kosovo Macedonia Montenegro Serbia Ukraine	Argentina Bolivia Brazil Chile Colombia Costa Rica Dominican Republic Ecuador Guatemala Haiti Honduras Jamaica Mexico Nicaragua Uruguay Panamá Peru Venezuela	Afghanistan Egypt Iraq Jordan Lebanon Morocco Pakistan Palestinian territories

**Table 1:** Overview of the 75 countries covered by this survey

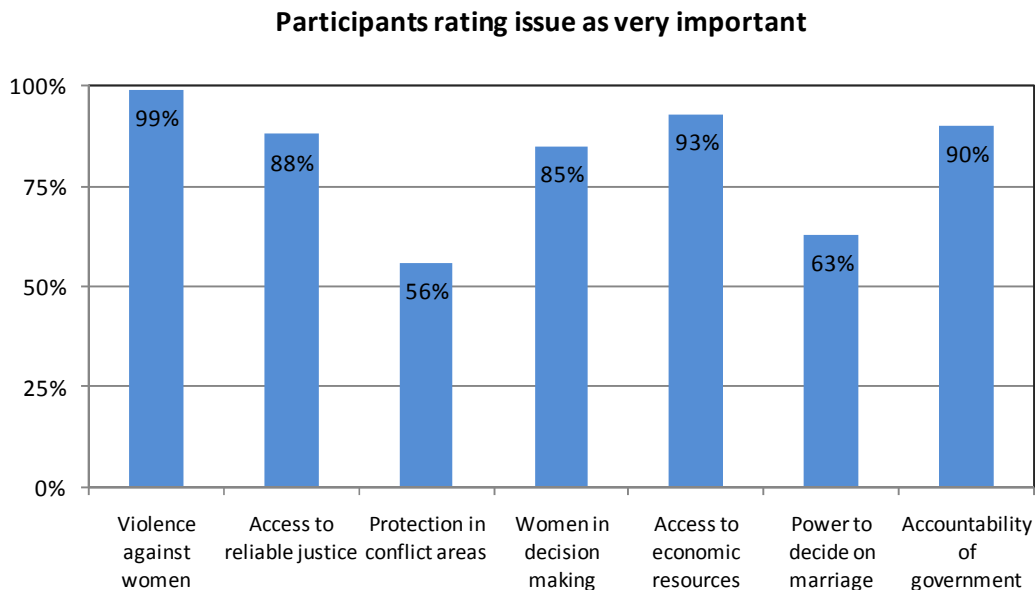
The methodology of the survey is provided in Appendix I.

## Section 1 Key priorities for women

Our survey marks the first time civil society at country level has been surveyed for its view on UN Women. We put specific questions to our survey partners to identify the clear priorities in their countries, and to find out which issues they want UN Women to address urgently. Their answers focused on several issues: violence against women (VAW); more involvement in decision-making; access to reliable justice systems; government accountability and access to economic resources. While it is clear from the findings that the surveyed organisations believe changes are needed for women everywhere, rural women were selected most often as the group most needing support and assistance.

### 1.1 What did we ask?

To find out which issues were considered most pressing for change in their countries, first we gave respondents a list of seven issues that represent key areas for action in terms of women's rights (violence against women; access to reliable justice; protection in conflict zones; women in decision-making; access to economic resources; power to decide on marriage; government accountability for women's rights) and asked if they thought these were very important. *Figure 1* shows their responses.



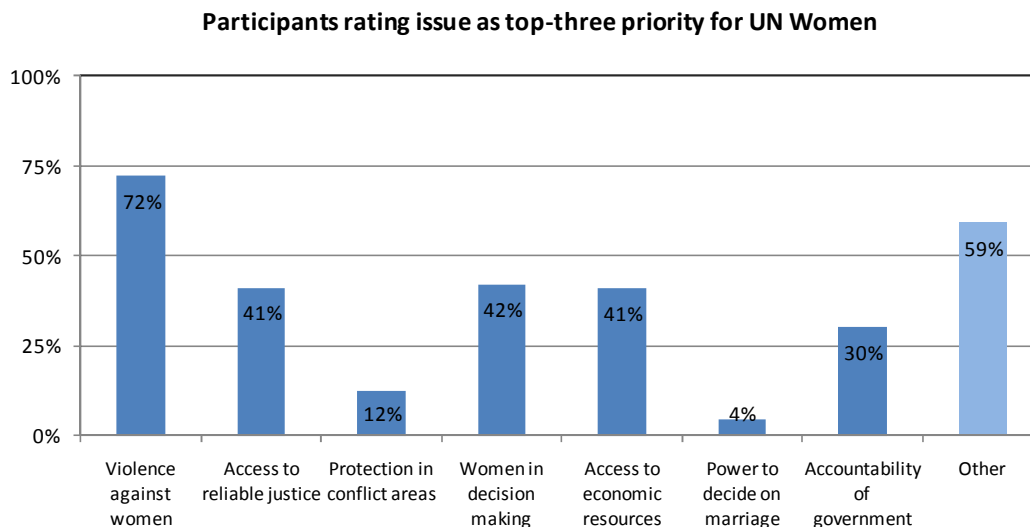
**Figure 1:** *Percentage of respondents who considered an issue very important (N=100 civil society organizations as with all other figures and tables throughout the report).*

Some issues were urgent for almost all respondents, regardless of where they lived. Top of these was violence against women (VAW), which 99% decided was urgent; access to economic resources was considered urgent by 93%; government accountability for women's rights was seen as urgent by 90% and 88% of respondents said access to a

## Women's needs and priorities at country level

reliable justice system was urgent. There was not much regional variation. *Table 2* shows the regional breakdown of these results.

Next, we asked what were the three top priorities were for UN Women in their country. This gave us a much clearer picture about their view of the needs and priorities at a country level in terms of the work of UN Women. We asked respondents to rank their top three women's rights issues and we gave them the chance to volunteer other issues they thought should be on the list. *Figure 2* indicates the results.



**Figure 2:** Percentage of respondents who rank an issue as one of the top three priorities at country level for UN Women to address urgently. The column "Other" contains additional issues named as a priority

As to the priorities for UN Women, VAW was consistently selected as the top priority. A second tier of priorities comprised three others selected by just under half of the respondents as very important at country level: access to reliable justice systems (41%); involving women in decision-making (42%) and access to economic resources (41%) were considered high priorities. Notably, 59 percent of the interviewed listed as a top priority something that wasn't on the list; these volunteered a host of issues they found to be priorities. Mentioned most frequently in this category was the lack of awareness of women's rights among many women, especially rural and uneducated women but also in society at large.

The regional breakdown of the answers is seen in *Table 3*. It shows there was not much regional variation on the issue of VAW, with almost two-thirds of respondents consistently selecting it as a priority for UN Women. This priority was selected most often by respondents from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), Eastern Europe and the Caucasus (EEC) and the Middle East and East and Maghreb (MEMAG). The lowest number of respondents selecting VAW as a priority came from Asia, but more than half the organisations (58%) from this region still selected VAW as a priority for UN Women.

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**Table 2:** Percentage of participants who marked an issue as very important, both in the total sample (all) and split out per region.

	Violence against women	Access to reliable justice	Protection in conflict areas	Women in decision making	Access to economic resources	Power to decide on marriage	Accountability of government
<b>All</b>	<b>99%</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>85%</b>	<b>93%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>90%</b>
Africa	97%	100%	77%	97%	100%	80%	100%
Asia & Pacific	100%	100%	67%	100%	100%	78%	100%
Eastern Europe & Caucasus	100%	88%	38%	88%	75%	38%	100%
Latin America & Caribbean	100%	52%	29%	43%	86%	19%	57%
Middle East & Maghreb	100%	100%	60%	100%	100%	100%	93%

**Table 3:** Percentage of participants who marked an issue as a top-three priority for UN Women, both for the total sample and broken down according to region. The column "other" contains additional issues named by participants as a priority.

	Violence against women	Access to reliable justice	Protection in conflict areas	Women in decision making	Access to economic resources	Power to decide on marriage	Accountability of government	Other
<b>All</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>59%</b>
Africa	64%	32%	21%	54%	32%	7%	36%	50%
Asia & Pacific	58%	52%	0%	52%	52%	0%	6%	81%
Eastern Europe & Caucasus	79%	36%	0%	43%	36%	7%	43%	64%
Latin America & Caribbean	86%	36%	14%	18%	55%	0%	32%	68%
Middle East & Maghreb	78%	59%	20%	39%	33%	7%	33%	33%

With regards to the second tier of priorities, CSOs from Africa identified women's involvement in decision-making as a priority for UN Women most often while access to a reliable justice system was considered most pressing for organisations from MEMAG. Education, especially in Asia, and improving awareness of women's rights and gender issues (two-thirds of respondents) were among issues mentioned in the category 'Other'.

### 1.2 Violence against women

Violence against women emerged overwhelmingly as the top priority for UN Women to address urgently at country level, with 99% describing it as very important. It remains the most pressing challenge for those working towards realising women's rights and fighting poverty and it remains ingrained in many societies.

More than two-thirds (72%) of the civil society and women's rights groups interviewed for this survey chose reducing or eradicating VAW as a top priority for UN Women at country level. About 10% of respondents reported that violence is increasing in their countries, especially in Asia and MEMAG.

'Unfortunately, Egypt is witnessing the highest rates of violence against women in its history, starting from sexual harassment on the streets and public places, to FGM, to denial of access to leadership positions, to psychological violence.'  
Middle East and Maghreb

Women from all regions face multiple forms of violence, including domestic and sexual violence, such as harassment and rape; respondents also reported early marriage, forced genital mutilation (FGM), foeticide and trafficking. According to the responses, the regional differences in the forms of violence are only marginal, but the interviews highlighted some differences in the violence depending on where women live.

'Our research on women's security and violence shows VAW is an extensive problem in our society: gender-based violence, trafficking, domestic violence, sexual harassment.'  
EEC

'Nigerian culture believes a male child is preferable to a girl child, thus exposing the girl child to all forms of violence, such as rape, FGM, early marriage and the denial of her right to education.'  
Africa

Many respondents identified rural women as a group that is particularly vulnerable to VAW, linking this to a lack of awareness about their rights (see below). But other groups are also particularly vulnerable, including women from social or ethnic minorities, disabled women or women from marginalised groups, older women, young girls, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, and female sex workers.

Respondents were clear about the underlying causes of VAW: discrimination, subordination and patriarchal systems whereby men decide all aspects of women's lives. Most respondents said these factors, combined with a lack of awareness of rights, are the core reasons why VAW is an urgent priority for UN Women to tackle at country level.

They also highlighted the role of government and governance structures at country level as critical factors. Legal protection for many women is still weak or non-existent. Many respondents said women face discrimination from both the legal and policing systems in their countries, and these systems are not held accountable.

The respondents had clear ideas about how to end VAW and their suggestions point to other top priorities UN Women must tackle urgently. Asked for their ideas on how to reduce VAW in their countries, some cited legal mechanisms such as reform of constitutions and government institutions, as well as through reliable justice and policing systems that are accessible to women on equal terms. Others stressed the need for women to have better access to employment and economic resources, to give them greater independence. Interviewees mentioned raising awareness and ensuring that education was gender sensitive. Some said they hoped that if women are able to access positions of political leadership, they will be able to lead efforts to eradicate VAW.

### 1.3 Women in decision-making

Decision-making was the second highest priority for UN Women, with 42% of respondents selecting it as a key priority. They said women need to be more involved in decision-making at all levels, from the community level to the political and business levels. Interviewees said women's difficulties in getting leadership positions in both and public and private sector are a key issue for respondents from all regions. Not only are women routinely under-represented in the political arena (local and national councils), but when they do have access to higher education and political rights, they are not taken seriously either as candidates in elections or in their communities, some interviewees said.

Sometimes the laws are in place but women still don't have equal access to positions of power or decision-making roles in governmental bodies, according to some respondents in Asia and the Pacific. Patriarchal social systems there prevent women from being represented in higher professional and political positions, according to some.

In EEC countries, traditional ideas about the role of women prevent them from accessing politics and government, some respondents said. But women everywhere face obstacles in being treated equally in the political, social and economic arenas. According to some respondents from the LAC region, the women there have gained political representation but some could benefit from training on gender equality and women's rights.

'Because of our culture, we have no right to take decisions – either in our own family or in the government.' Africa
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### 1.4 Access to reliable justice systems

Violence against women, among other issues, cannot be addressed without reliable justice systems, the interviewees made clear. For 41%, access to a reliable justice system was one of the top three priorities. The results showed that all the regions are united in their need for access to a reliable justice system, with slight variations. Justice systems in all regions are not serving women either because their complaints are not taken seriously, or because discrimination against them is inbuilt, they said.

Interviewees reported many gaps in their justice systems with regards to implementing women's rights. These include the absence of laws guaranteeing women's rights and inconsistent legislation, such as differences between civil and traditional legal codes,

and judiciaries that are ill-prepared to open their doors to women and uphold their rights. Many said communities must support women by upholding laws in situations such as where, for example, a woman is granted a divorce in court but is told by the leader of her community to return to her husband.

The regional variation in responses might reflect differences in the regions' economic development as well as other difference between countries. In the EEC and LAC regions interviewees said a weak and insensitive judiciary is an obstacle to equal rights for women. In Asia and Africa interviewees highlighted weak or inconsistent laws regarding women's rights and the difficulty many rural women face in accessing justice. The gaps between the civil and traditional legal codes explain why issues such as VAW are not addressed in MEMAG, they said.

Justice systems that function like this cannot enforce women's rights and only contribute to an accountability gap at national level concerning women's rights and gender justice.

In addition to reliable justice systems, interviewees said there is a need for legislation to protect women against violence. Existing laws must be enforced through efficient police and judiciary systems that need to be sensitised to women's rights through training.

'We have a great need to review discriminatory laws, for example the law on adultery, which is highly discriminatory against Cameroonian women.' Africa

### 1.5 Economic empowerment

Women's access to economic resources was named as a priority for UN Women by 41% of the organisations interviewed. As *Table 2* shows, this issue is particularly important for civil society from Latin American countries and Asia and the Pacific. The lack of access to economic resources is a complex problem. Regional variations can be explained by the different levels of economic development in the regions. Women in Africa, Latin America and MEMAG still struggle with the basics such as unregulated property or land rights. In Asia or EEC countries women lack protection in the workplace, (especially unskilled workers) and earn much lower wages than men. As noted elsewhere, women in rural areas are particularly affected by a lack of economic empowerment.

'There is great need for access to economic resources, such as credit, land titles and ownership. Financial institutions and other authorities discriminate women, because they do not have them.' Latin America and the Caribbean

'Women are abandoned by men and not supported by men. They need to earn their own income.' Africa

However, across all the regions respondents identified the low status of women and stereotypical views of their role as underlying reasons for the economic injustice many women face. Respondents told us economic empowerment is vital because it not only allows women to meet their basic needs and have more decision-making roles but it makes them stronger and better-equipped to deal with issues such as gender-based violence.

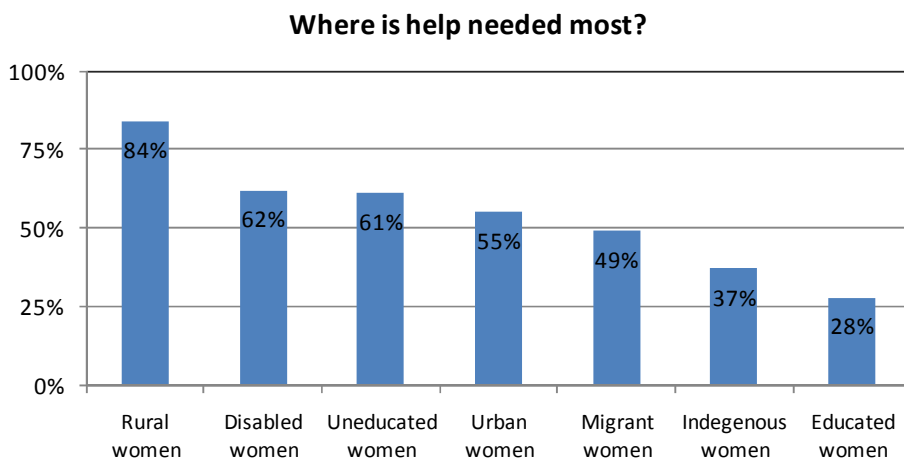
'It is challenging for women to take part in the formal economy, particularly in rural areas. This should be a focus.' Middle East and Maghreb

### 1.6 Other priorities

The organisations surveyed felt that in 2011 many women around the world do not know about their rights. More than half of respondents (59%) selected the category 'Other' when they were asked to identify the priorities for UN Women. A wide variety of issues were volunteered by interviewees in this category, ranging from monitoring the implementation of rights, education, addressing harmful traditional practices, working on stereotypical views of women, women's political, sexual and reproductive rights and better protection for disabled women. One of the issues that was mentioned most frequently in this category was a lack of awareness of their rights among many women, especially rural and uneducated women, but also in society at large. This was mentioned by 13 respondents out of the 59. Many said that a lack of awareness about women's rights is blocking progress at country level and improving awareness can help change to mindsets about gender stereotyping and roles.

'We need to correct stereotyped views on women; we need to change ideas that women's roles are cooking and taking care of children, and that in education they are expected to get higher marks only in subjects like art. We need to change our ideas about who are leaders.'  
Asia

One of the clearest messages from the survey respondents was that rural women are in the greatest need of help. As *Figure 3* shows, 84% said rural women are the group needing help most urgently, and interviewees gave clear reasons for their decision. They said that rural women are often the poorest of the poor and suffer most from discrimination, all forms of violence and illiteracy. While women in cities might face different forms of discrimination, rural women are least aware of their rights and have much less access to resources such as jobs, information, networking, and education and reproductive services. They are the women who most urgently need to know about their rights, and who are most in need of support to retain these rights, whether these affect property, land, health or marriages.



**Figure 3:** Percentage of all respondents indicating women from which groups in society are in most urgent need of help (multiple answers possible).

Our research showed that most respondents believe rural women need very specific forms of support. Among the interventions recommended by respondents were raising



## Women's needs and priorities at country level

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rural women's awareness of their rights and providing access to employment, training and networking opportunities. They said UN Women should take steps to find out more about the daily lives of rural women to identify which interventions would have the most impact.

'Rural women need help to combat illiteracy, early marriages and domestic violence. While educated urban women need help to take real part in decision making and drive change in their communities.' Middle East and Maghreb

A high proportion (62%) wanted disabled women to receive special attention because of their health and educational needs. Almost as many (61%) said uneducated women are a high priority because illiteracy holds them back and leaves them especially vulnerable.

More than half of respondents (55%) said urban women should be targeted. The reason our interviewees gave was that urban women might be more involved in decision-making roles and could set an example to others in rural areas.

## Section 2

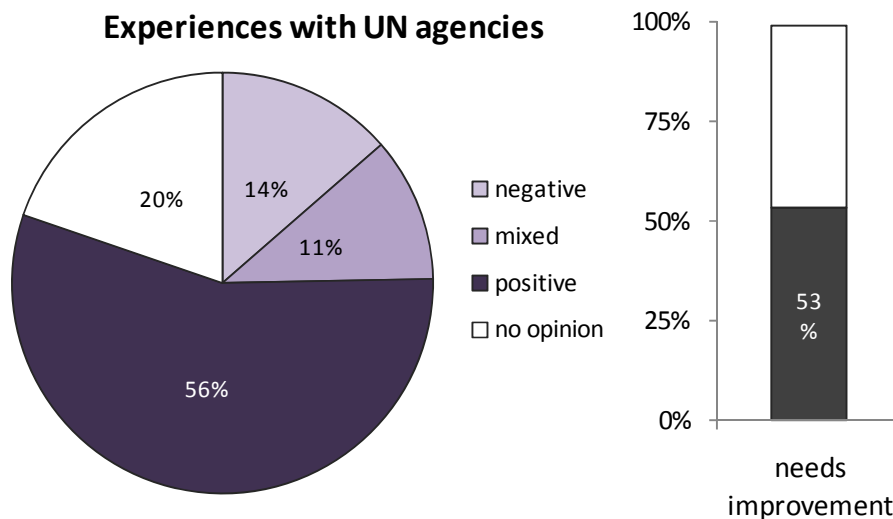
### How should UN Women work at country level?

A key aim of our research was to help us provide clear recommendations as to how UN Women can work most effectively at country level. As a first step, we asked grassroots and women’s rights organisations about their past experiences of working with UN agencies, and about their expectations of UN Women in future. In this way, we hope that lessons can be learned from the past and that crucial information about how UN Women can work most effectively at country level is made available.

The organisations that took part in our survey had clear ideas about UN agencies’ relationships with national governments and civil society groups, and how these should be improved. Their responses suggested that UN agencies need to coordinate their actions on women’s rights and gender equality, and that gender sensitivity should be improved within the UN. Most of the interviewees had heard of UN Women (the lowest percentage was recorded in Latin America, with 62%), but many told us they were unclear about what exactly it will do.

#### 2.1 The experience of working with other UN agencies

Organisations were generally positive about their past experience with UN agencies including UNDP, UNIFEM, UNFPA and UNHCR. While a majority of CSOs said that their involvement with UN agencies had been positive, 53% also said there was room for improvement. *Figure 4* and *Table 4* show the findings, including a regional breakdown.



**Figure 4:** Percentage who reported predominantly positive, negative or mixed experiences with UN agencies, or who did not give a clear assessment (“no opinion”); percentage of participants who feel that the work of UN agencies needs to be improved.

**Table 4:** Percentage of participants who have mainly positive, negative or balanced experiences with UN agencies, or who did not give a clear assessment (“no opinion”). Also given is the percentage of participants who feel that the work of UN agencies needs to be improved.

	All	Africa	Asia & Pacific	Eastern Europe & Caucasus	Latin America & Caribbean	Middle East & Maghreb
Negative	13%	8%	8%	20%	27%	7%
Mixed	11%	4%	8%	13%	27%	7%
Positive	55%	76%	42%	60%	40%	40%
No opinion	21%	12%	42%	7%	7%	47%
needs improvement	52%	48%	58%	33%	47%	80%

Although many interviewees reported positive experiences with UN agencies, a large number said they find it difficult to access UN agencies; it is not always clear whom to contact about a specific issue and there is a lack of information about where to get technical, political and financial support. Around a third (30%) of respondents said this information is lacking not just because UN offices are based primarily in capitals and government buildings and are therefore geographically distant but because UN agencies do not have knowledge of social structures and daily realities at country level.

'I think the UN is too far removed from work at grassroots level. It is necessary to collaborate and divide the tasks. I think the UN should inform itself better about what the issues are at grassroots level and, on the other hand, the UN should disseminate its own function, role and relevance to CSOs, NGOs and ordinary people.' Africa

## 2.2 UN Women's partners

To gauge their expectations of UN Women, we asked organisations who they thought it should work with. The majority (86%) said UN Women should work with NGOs, including women's rights organisations; 41% said it should work with grassroots groups and 66% said it should work with national governments even though our research suggested that many had found collaborations between UN agencies and governments a source of tension. Under a fifth (18%) said it should work with other UN agencies at country level. Some mentioned labour organisations, research institutes and the private sector. We then asked in more detail about how these collaborations should work.

## 2.3 Working with governments

66% of respondents indicated that UN Women should work with governments because they hold decision-making power on women's rights and gender equality in countries. The collaboration between UN agencies and government is seen as key to reforming legal systems, justice and law enforcement institutions but there is a tension in that CSOs find UN agencies too 'close' with governments and this strains their working relationship with agencies.

Many respondents were critical of the way UN agencies have collaborated with governments in the past, and want UN agencies to strive for independence. Of the organisations that took part in the survey, more than a quarter (28%) said UN agencies

are too close to governments. Some respondents said UN programmes are sometimes scaled down over time because of what is going on in national politics, especially when it comes to women's rights issues or gender equality.

Respondents said UN Women should help to drive decision-making and then enforce policies regarding women's rights and gender equality. UN Women must help ensure governments are accountable for these issues, interviewees said.

'The UN agencies should be more critical of the government, for example the government should comply with CEDAW. They need to put more pressure on the government.' Middle East and Maghreb

Although many want UN Women to work with governments, this collaboration should not mean civil society is excluded from funds and projects or that the impact of UN work is not felt at grassroots level. About half the respondents said the UN agencies they work with at grassroots level tend to work exclusively with government and national NGOs which have been 'approved by government'.

'In our country the UN works mostly with the government; therefore, you cannot see the impact on the ground. When civil society wants to connect with the UN, they need to go to the ministry. UNICEF had direct working relations on children's programmes, to see what was happening and have direct contact with the beneficiaries.

'When all contact is through the ministry, it makes the UN very remote. Because of the link with the government, they make selective choices about whom to work with. Organisations that are critical are losing out on information and funding. For example, if we write down in UN shadow reports what we see from the ground, we are not regarded as being very friendly to the ministry.' Africa

Some interviewees said UN agencies should be more open and inclusive.

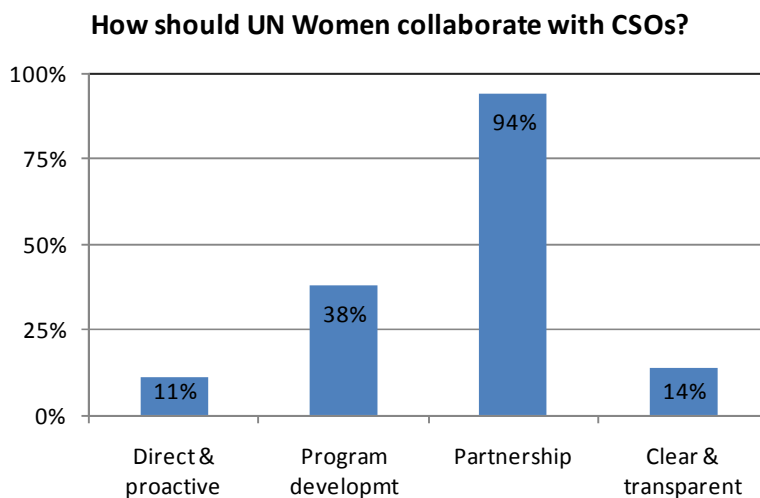
'We are the third largest organisation in South Africa on women's rights and none of the UN organisations have ever come to from a partnership with us. Even if we reach out to them, they do not reply and nobody knows what they do. They are not always able to make links and connections with the grassroots.' Africa

Some respondents expressed a hope that a more independent relationship with governments would lead to more inclusion of CSOs, and many had clear ideas about how UN Women should engage with governments, NGOs and grassroots organisations.

## 2.4 Working in partnership with civil society

Civil society organizations interviewed for this survey made clear that UN Women must consider civil society groups as genuine partners at country level, and that there is a need for more contact and dialogue between UN agencies and civil society, including grassroots organisations. UN Women must engage with civil society differently to UN agencies in the past and develop a relationship that is based on being genuine partners, with more transparency and greater accessibility for more impact at country level. Respondents felt that in future, this partnership must involve supporting women’s organisations and other stakeholders to collaborate on fostering and implementing women’s rights and gender equality to make the best use of resources and avoid duplication.

Almost half (49%) of interviewees said CSOs need the support of UN Women, which can help them to implement programmes and lobby for women’s rights. UN Women should use its access to governments to open up spaces for civil society participation in decision-making at a national level. It should support the efforts of CSOs by providing training, access to funding and knowledge/information sharing to these groups, interviewees said.



**Figure 5:** Percentage of survey participants who argued that UN Women should collaborate with CSOs in a particular way: with emphasis either on direct and proactive contacts, on joint program development, on genuine partnerships, or on transparent information about the work of UN Women at country level. Participants could give multiple answers.

**Table 5:** Percentage of survey participants per region who argued that UN Women should collaborate with CSOs in a particular way: with emphasis either on direct and proactive contacts, on programme development, on partnerships, or on transparency. Participants could give multiple answers.

## Civil society expectations of UN Women

	All	Africa	Asia & Pacific	Eastern Europe & Caucasus	Latin America & Caribbean	Middle East & Maghreb
Direct & proactive	<b>11%</b>	17%	0%	0%	29%	0%
Program development	<b>38%</b>	33%	50%	56%	19%	40%
Partnership	<b>94%</b>	87%	94%	100%	95%	100%
Clear & transparent	<b>14%</b>	27%	0%	25%	5%	7%

Our research revealed frustration with how the UN works in many countries and a sense that UN agencies are remote from the grassroots level. Two-thirds of respondents said UN programmes and resources are not transferred to civil society in general and the local and grassroots level in particular. Around a fifth said UN programmes are not fine-tuned to the needs of women or girls at grassroots level.

'There is a profound gap between the UN and women's movements not just because women find it difficult to travel to the capital, but even more because the UN doesn't relate to the reality of women in the country.' Latin America and the Caribbean

There was criticism the UN does not take into account the experience of CSOs. Many want UN Women to seek input from CSOs before they draw up strategies at country level rather than approach them only after the planning stage.

'They [UN agencies] mainly work at the state level or with governmental organisations. They do the formal work, but this does not reach women practically. They make laws and systems, which is very important. But these acts and laws are not shared at the grassroots level. If women do not know about these laws, they do not work. And for the majority of women, nothing changes. That is why it is important to work with NGOs in rural areas to bring information and protection to the lowest level.' EEC

Almost all interviewees (86%) said UN Women should both invite CSOs to experience their organisation and visit them to see how they worked at grassroots level. Some proposed that UN Women should experience life at the grassroots level for longer periods to gain an understanding of the daily reality for many women.

Another issue that emerged from the findings was the need for transparency: UN Women must ensure that its programmes and resources are transparent to CSOs.

'There is a need for involvement (i.e.: a transparent and agreed-upon consultation mechanism). Involvement of all types of stakeholders is important. Clear indicators and reporting mechanisms should be developed.' EEC

Figure 5 and Table 5 show how the organisations responded when we asked how they wanted UN Women to interact with CSOs: their responses (above) indicate which aspect of interaction they find most important: direct and proactive contact; joint development of programmes; durable partnerships; transparent information about the work of UN Women.

The results showed that 60% want UN Women to play a key role in facilitating and coordinating the work of CSOs on women's rights and gender equality. Some suggested

this happens via a national platform with UN Women taking charge of the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of a national programme. UN Women could bring multiple NGOs and CSOs together to create a national discourse on women's rights issues, and encourage other agencies to work from a human rights perspective.

'UN Women should work with much more power to encourage agencies to work from the human rights perspective so that they understand it is an obligation not only for the state but for the UN agencies.' Latin America and the Caribbean

### 2.5 Women's rights across the UN

Our research highlights concerns about the way the UN has worked on women's rights, based on the experiences of our survey respondents. They identified a number of serious gaps which show that women's rights and gender equality have not been taken seriously by UN agencies at country level. These gaps include:

#### ***The need for coordination***

The coordination and ownership of women's rights and gender equality issues among the UN agencies is unclear, according to many respondents. Some recalled that when they had approached other UN agencies about women's rights they had been forwarded to UNIFEM. They concluded that women's rights are not a priority for other UN agencies.

'UNDP does not think gender is an issue at all and it is very difficult for women's groups to get access to UNDP with issues concerning women's rights or gender equality. Most of the time UNDP will direct us to UNIFEM, saying that is the agency for you. UNIFEM has been working closely with the women's movement and women's groups in the country. However, it lacks resources – human and financial. They start working on an issue and support women's groups to take it up but they often cannot support it to the tangible end. Most programmes supported by UNIFEM are short-term and events-based so it is very difficult to achieve their goals. UNIFEM does not have a strong presence in the countryside.' Asia

Respondents reported confusion about UN work on women's issues because different agencies don't coordinate their activities: 15% of respondents said there are duplications and contradictions in activities of parallel UN programmes, and stressed the need for a coherent approach. There needs to be more communication, coordination and willingness to collaborate between UN agencies, they said. Some interviewees suggested that UN Women should assume this coordinating role at country level, for example, aligning different programmes concerning women's rights so as to avoid duplications and contradictions.

'There needs to be more coherence between different UN agencies; they all need to be expected to prioritise women's rights. Emphasis must be placed on a change in mentality in all the organisms, even within the UN.' Latin America and the Caribbean

#### ***Effectiveness of women's rights programmes***

Of respondents who had worked with UN agencies, 15% said the level of commitment to women's rights and gender equality of UN agencies at country level depends on the individual staff working for the agency in that country.

Asked about their experiences with UN agencies at country level, 30% said clearly most UN agencies don't incorporate a gender equality or women's rights perspective in their work. Some wanted to see a high-quality internal capacity building programme on these issues within the UN system. A number said UN agencies with a majority of male staff don't want to incorporate women's rights, gender equality work or gender mainstreaming in their programmes, and some perceived these issues as a threat.

In general, respondents perceived UN agency staff as gender insensitive. Some suggested UN Women should ensure that UN agency personnel are trained on women's rights, gender equality and gender mainstreaming. Interviewees said UN Women could help develop standards for training to the other agencies, for example, on mainstreaming the gender equality perspective into other areas of work, or providing simple gender training based on unified standards as agencies tend to organise these things differently. UN Women could ensure only gender sensitive staff lead development programmes.

Organisations we spoke to said UN Women should work to get more women in leadership positions within the UN at country level: to date, women's access to these roles has been limited. Our survey suggested a more equal balance of men and women in key positions within UN agencies could make a difference for women's rights.

'In the Gambia, we are seeing an increase in "subtle patriarchal resistance" within the organisations that are mainly male dominated. We have observed the systematic marginalisation of women's rights organisations – naming them as "radical" in their approach to women's issues. The agenda for achieving women's rights and gender equality are compromised by the type of people appointed to such positions [...] The gender architecture in such organisations in such bodies must be looked at closely. The right competencies must be captured for women's rights work.' The Gambia

Respondents told us that the focus on project-based work is not sustainable and they recommended a shift towards programming work. UN staff should be recruited on a longer-term basis to bring about lasting change in the situation of local women, they said.

UN Women could have a role in helping to organise awareness campaigns and providing training on these issues in areas like schools, according to some. The wish to see experimentation and risk and more innovative strategies was also expressed.



### Conclusion and recommendations

Our research marks the first time that civil society, including grassroots and women's organisations at country level has been surveyed on how UN Women should proceed to make most impact at country level. This survey and report provide insights into information and insider opinion on the new UN agency which were previously not available in this way.

The choice of priorities which survey respondents recommended for UN Women makes clear that huge gaps exist in terms of establishing, strengthening and enforcing women's rights at country level. Clearly, there is also an accountability gap concerning governments' performance on women's rights and gender equality. UN Women can have real impact if it aligns its work around the needs and priorities of women and civil society at country level. Based on the findings of this survey and the responses of the participants, we make the following recommendations:

1. UN Women must prioritise eradicating all forms of violence against women. This includes raising women's awareness of their rights and working with civil society and governments to create reliable justice systems and ensuring women are represented at all levels. Next, economic empowerment is identified as another strategy to increase the status of women and eradicate violence against women.
2. UN Women should work towards establishing a comprehensive international action plan that addresses all forms of VAW, with clear and binding targets and timetables, and a specific focus at country level.
3. UN Women should prioritise rural women as a target group. Their needs have been chosen as most urgent by respondents to the survey because they have fewest resources. UN Women should ensure its programmes are tailored to fit specific groups, such as disabled or uneducated women, to maximise impact.
4. UN Women should adopt a different approach to working at country level to UN agencies in the past. Its approach should be transformative, leading to actual change. UN Women must develop transparent strategies and best practices on key issues highlighted in this survey. These need to be made visible at country level. It needs to put gender equality at the center of the UN by supporting other agencies to include the women's rights perspective in their work and monitoring their progress. As UN Women expands, this way of operating should be built into its structures and systems so that it makes a real difference to the lives of women and girls
5. A central element of UN Women's strategy should be the inclusion of CSOs as genuine partners. Civil society wants UN Women to support their efforts to empower women, strengthen their rights and ensure they play a role in the development of their countries. The creation of UN Women should signal a departure from the practices that left CSOs feeling marginalised in the past. Instead, UN Women should capitalise on the valuable human resource offered by CSOs by working in a transparent manner with CSOs, providing training, funding and information-sharing and calling on their experience. CSOs call on UN Women to seek strong alliances with the grassroots level to maximise the impact of its work.

6. UN Women needs to examine its relationships with governments at country level. In the past, the way in which the UN has worked with governments has been a source of tension with civil society. UN Women should use its access to governments to open up spaces for CSOs to play a part in strengthening women's rights and promoting gender equality in their countries. Survey participants want UN Women to work with their governments but the new agency should strive for more independence from governments so that a lack of political will does not delay progress in addressing women's rights. UN Women should ensure that governments deliver on their commitments to women's rights and that they sign up to international commitments.

## Annex 1 Methodology

### Survey design

The aim of this survey was to collect the views and expectations about the country level operations of UN Women from a wide range of women's rights organisations and NGOs involved in promoting women's rights and gender equality. This was done by means of a questionnaire containing both open and closed questions. The set of questions is included as Annex 2. The open questions were intended to elicit the views of survey participants on the work of UN Women at country level and related matters. The closed questions aimed to identify participants' shared priorities. The survey was carried out via telephone interviews, which meant that their response could be clarified and elaborated immediately.

The questions were available in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, and telephone interviews took place in those languages. Because of an interest expressed by the survey participants, the survey team then assessed the need to translate the survey into other languages. This led to an Arabic translation for partners in the Middle East.

The results were analysed at a regional level. The geographic regions of this survey were defined on the basis of socioeconomic and cultural similarity, and are not equal to UN definitions of geographic regions:

Africa:	Sub-saharan Africa
Asia and Pacific:	Asia and the Pacific countries, except the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan
Eastern Europe (non-EU) & Caucasus (EEC)	Eastern Europe, excluding EU member states, and countries from the Caucasus region
Latin America & Caribbean: (LAC)	The Americas and the Caribbean, excluding the United States and Canada.
Middle East & Maghreb:	The Middle East including Afghanistan and Pakistan and the Maghreb countries (Northern Africa)

OECD countries were not included in the survey.

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## How the survey was carried out

The survey was conducted in five stages:

### *1. Call for expressions of interest (EOI)*

The call for participation was formulated by Oxfam Novib and VSO UK and translated into French, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic. Oxfam Novib circulated the EOI through its regional desks and other members of the Oxfam confederation. The EOI was also sent to organisations affiliated to or following the global GEAR campaign and to organisations registered at the global WUNRN list serve. VSO UK spread the call through their colleagues affiliated with the UK Gender and Development Network (GADN). The call for expression of interest was aimed at women's rights organisations, national civil society organisations and grassroots groups with experience and knowledge on the position of women of their country. Interested organisations were asked to provide information about their work, a contact person (spokesperson for the interview), telephone numbers and a preferred language.

### *2. Selection of survey participants*

The response to our EOI was overwhelming, with 1,028 expressions of interest received. All the responses were registered according to region. Out of the registered organisations, a sample of 100 was selected following these predefined criteria:

### *3. Quantitative level*

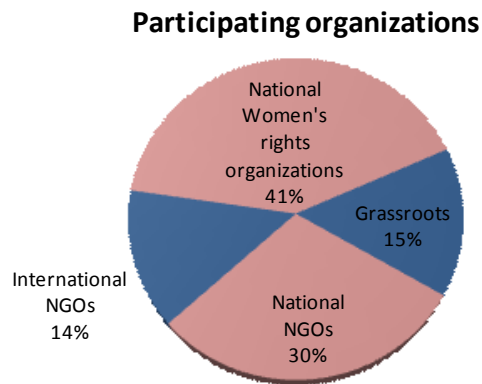
Twenty organisations were to be selected from each region. In each region 20% of the selected organisations must be working with marginalised groups, such as disabled women or indigenous women. The total sample had to have the following composition:

- 30% national level women's rights organisations
- 30% local and/or grassroots organisation working on women's rights and gender equality
- 25% national level NGOs with core programming promoting women's rights and gender equality
- 15% international NGO programme offices/country teams with core programming on women's rights and gender equality

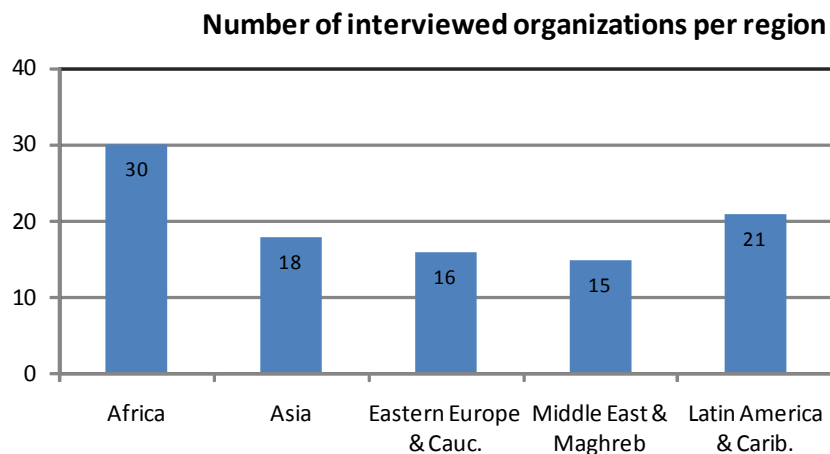
### *4. Qualitative level*

- Survey participants must have in-depth knowledge about the situation of women and girls, women's rights, gender equality and poverty in their country
  - Survey participants had to be able to define what needs to be done by UN Women to improve that situation and make suggestions for the role of UN Women
  - Survey participants had to have some knowledge or experience of working on women's rights, gender equality and poverty projects of the UN and its agencies at national level (e.g.: country teams from UNIFEM, UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA)
  - Survey participants had to be willing to give an opinion on the strengths and weaknesses of their work
-

During the selection it became clear that focusing on the quantitative criteria would mean a significant number of participants did not match the qualitative criteria. It was decided to let the qualitative criteria prevail over the quantitative criteria and this led to a change in quotas per CSO group taking part. It was difficult to achieve the target percentage of minorities in combination with the qualitative criteria. In most cases, qualitative criteria prevailed. The percentages of survey participants were as shown in *Figure 1.1*.



**Figure 1.1:** Organisations that participated in the survey, per category. All organizations focused on minorities were also grassroots organisations.



**Figure 1.2.:** Number of organizations interviewed per region.

Not all regions were equally represented in the applications received before the deadline. The vast majority came from Africa, while the share of applications coming from Eastern Europe (non-EU) & Caucasus, the Middle East & Maghreb and Asia & Pacific was insufficient. Therefore, responses from some regions (EEC and the Middle East) were accepted after the closing date, and extra efforts were made to increase the number of survey partners from these regions. Nevertheless, we were not able to achieve the target number of survey participants per region. As a result, the number of interviews for EEC and the Middle East & Maghreb were reduced from 20 to 16 and from 20 to 15 respectively. To keep the total sample size at 100, the number of survey participants from

Africa was increased from 20 to 30. Asia & Pacific concluded with 18 and LAC with 21 successful interviews. Figure 1.2 provides an overview of the final number of organizations interviewed for this survey per region.

### *5. Interviews of survey participants*

When the selection of survey participants per region was finalised, emails were sent to the selected organisations to schedule the survey interviews. The interviews were carried out by a team of consultants. Each consultant was assigned to a specific region, and was responsible for all contact with the participating organisations within her/his region. If an organisation did not respond to an email, the survey team would make a phone call to set a date for the interview, or conduct the interview instantly. The interview consisted of 13 questions, open and closes. Annex 2 shows the questionnaire.

### *6. Data analysis*

After all the interviews were conducted, each consultant processed the information for their region. The information was collected according to three survey topics:

- Women's needs and priorities
- Women's experiences with UN's women's rights and gender equality work at country level to date
- Women's expectations on UN Women's country-level operations

The responses to some questions (questions 6, 8 and 9) were categorised by an independent consultant, who subsequently tabulated results and synthesised all data.

## **Survey Risks**

The survey design contained a few risk factors;

- Internet and telephone connections can be unreliable and internet access is limited in certain parts of the world, especially in the areas where grassroots organisations are based. This complicated the interviews: arbitrary disruption of email traffic hampered the communication about interview dates; poor internet connections caused interruptions during interviews; sometimes contact or interviews were impossible and thus other survey participants had to be selected and contacted.
  - The way in which organisations were first approached might have introduced some bias: for example, rural organisations were more difficult to reach than civil society based in cities. This may be the reason why fewer grassroots organisations than planned were represented in the survey.
  - Beforehand, it had been uncertain if enough organisations matching the qualitative criteria would respond to the call for participation; in the event, this was true for some regions, though not for others.
  - The survey could generate a wide variety of responses and opinions with regard to the operational capacity of UN Women at country level, which would be impossible to cover here. This report presents the survey's main findings and recommendations.
  - It is possible that respondents from specific categories of countries such as conflict countries would have different responses to the survey questions than other respondents. There was no concrete indication of this in the data, but this was not analyzed in detail.
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## Survey Questions

1. Can you describe briefly the position of women and girls in your country?
2. If you think about the position of women and girls in your country, what are the things that need to change most urgently?
3. What should be done to better protect women's rights? What needs to change most urgently?

Option	Not important at all	I don't know	Very important
Reduction of violence against women and girls			
Access to a reliable justice system			
The protection of women's rights in conflict areas			
More women in decision making positions (parliament, community council)			
Access for women to economic resources, such as credits and land titles, property			
Possibility for women and girls to decide when and with whom to marry			
Accountability of government for women's rights			
Other (optional):			

4. If you were in charge of UN Women in your country, which three things would you start addressing first? [using previously given list]
  5. Have you worked with UNDP, UNFPA or UNICEF?
  6. How was your experience with these organisations? Do they do good work on women's rights and gender equality? What should they do differently?
  7. Are you aware that a new UN agency called UN Women has been created? Do you know what it is supposed to do?
  8. Who should UN Women collaborate with in your country?
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9. How should UN Women collaborate with women's rights organisations and other civil society stakeholders in your country?

10. Should UN women work in your country? (not reported on)

11. Women from which group in society need help most urgently?

Rural women	
Urban women	
Educated women	
Uneducated women	
Migrant women	
Indigenous women	
Disabled women	

12. If UN Women wants to get a better understanding of women's situations, what is the best way to do this: to invite them to be included, or to visit them, or both?

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