

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/spogmay-ahmed/show-me-the-money-accountability-womens-rights>

Show Me The Money: The Fight For Funding And Accountability For Women's Rights

[Open Democracy 50.50](#)

Aid donors, governments and the United Nations have made many commitments to gender equality. Their actions have been less impressive.



UN secretary-general António Guterres walks with women at Za'atari refugee camp. Photo: Flickr/UN Women. Some rights reserved.

Across United Nations programmes, gender equality is vastly underfunded. When the UN Women agency was created in 2010, [activists estimated](#) that it needed at least a \$1 billion budget (for comparison, [total revenue](#) for the children's agency UNICEF was over \$4.8 billion in 2016). Several years on, and donors have consistently failed to meet this target. UN Women's [total revenue](#) for 2016 was under \$335 million.

Aid donors have repeatedly committed to what's called "mainstreaming" gender across various global development efforts (to assess all policies, at all levels, for their different impacts on women and men). But their records are disappointing.

For example: In 2013 and 2014, [only 24%](#) of international aid for "economic and productive sectors" (including public financial management and urban

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/spogmay-ahmed/show-me-the-money-accountability-womens-rights>

development) went to projects listing gender equality as a specific objective. Just 2% was spent on projects where women's economic empowerment was the primary goal.

Civil society organisations are receiving more [money](#) for gender-related work, but direct funding for women's rights organisations still comprises a [meagre share](#) of aid budgets – even for donors like [Canada](#), which earlier this year announced an explicitly [“feminist” foreign assistance policy](#).

Spending on gender equality by other, larger UN agencies is inadequate. Their gender advisors lack the power to enact the transformative change that could direct institutional resources and focus towards gender equality.

And while the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework, agreed in 2015, does include a goal to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls – it is the only one [whose targets lack specific deadlines](#).

Restricted Access

Feminist activists and women's rights groups are trying to tackle the lack of accountability for donor and government promises on gender equality. We have sought to monitor their commitments, and to confront these with their actions.

However, at the UN we've been severely limited by rules and restrictions on how civil society can participate in official processes. Earlier this summer, a UN meeting to review progress on the SDGs provided a case in point.

The second [High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#) was held in July in New York City. This year, the gender equality SDG was under review.

The [Women's Major Group](#) (an open-ended group representing civil society organisations focused on women's rights) was able to monitor developments at the meeting. But civil society participation in the proceedings was limited.

The UN allowed only brief civil society interventions in review sessions, and interpreting services were often unavailable. When India's government presented its record on the SDGs, civil society was prohibited from asking questions.

Such restrictions enable governments to act (or not) on gender equality, without accountability. At the forum, some country delegates even tried to reopen debate over human rights issues already enshrined in the SDG framework.

In the end, references to child marriage, female genital mutilation, and sexual and reproductive health and rights were left out of [the forum's final report](#) altogether. This is significant, reflecting the desire of some governments to prioritise certain women's rights issues over others.

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/spogmay-ahmed/show-me-the-money-accountability-womens-rights>

Feminist accountability

Activists organised under the [Feminist UN campaign](#) have called for a “[feminist accountability framework](#)” to bridge the gap between rhetoric and action at the international body.

This framework links the SDGs and their targets to key international women’s rights agreements, like the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) and the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#).

The campaign also urges the UN to collect better global development data, disaggregated by sex. This would help civil society track and challenge the actions of governments, and what they claim to achieve. It would also help us scrutinise the UN.

We need full disclosure of UN funding and spending, including the amount directed to women’s rights programmes and gender mainstreaming. Secretary-general António Guterres [has also been asked](#) to hold regular high-level meetings of experts, including civil society, to analyse the state of financing for women’s rights and gender equality.

At the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women meeting in March, Guterres [said](#): “We stand for a powerful truth: women’s equality works for the world”. While these words ring true, they come with a responsibility to follow-through.