



**CORPORATE FORMATIVE  
EVALUATION OF UN WOMEN'S  
APPROACH TO INNOVATION**





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# FOREWORD

Innovation, technology and the identification of new solutions for development problems are critical in order to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. As a result, innovation is increasingly being prioritized within the work of the United Nations system and the wider international development community. Within this context, UN Women has increased its focus on innovation in recent years, based on the recognition that innovation and technology frequently do not benefit men and women equally, but can potentially be leveraged for women's empowerment.

The Independent Evaluation Service (IES) of the UN Women Independent Evaluation and Audit Services (IEAS) undertook this evaluation as part of its corporate evaluation plan with the aim of assessing and providing forward-looking recommendations on what innovation means for UN Women, the value added of UN Women's normative and coordination work in the area of innovation for gender equality, the results of UN Women's innovation initiatives, and the systems, processes and culture of UN Women to support innovation. The evaluation covered the period 2017 to 2020.

The evaluation found that there is no clear and widely shared definition of innovation within UN Women, nor is there a common vision of how innovation should be integrated into UN Women's work. This has resulted in a piecemeal approach in which the extent and nature of innovative work is dependent on the interest of key Regional or Country Offices or individual personnel. At the same time, the evaluation concluded that although UN Women does not currently play a significant role in normative and coordination work on gender and innovation, it has great potential to do so, as evidenced through its participation in the Generation Equality Action Coalition and the EQUALS Global Partnership. In terms of results, the evaluation found that UN Women lacks the technical capacity to identify and mitigate challenges specific to the implementation of technology-based innovative initiatives. However, there is potential for UN Women to support impact at

scale in settings where UN Women contributes to the development of innovative approaches that can be scaled up by partners.

The evaluation recommends that UN Women develop and disseminate a clear definition of innovation accompanied by a concrete strategy, priorities and accountability framework, with a clear structure and corresponding resources allocated for leadership and accountability. UN Women should also identify its added value in the normative and coordination space related to innovation and focus on developing, trialling and documenting innovative solutions for addressing gender equality problems, and on influencing partners to scale up solutions that prove effective. Organization-wide partnerships with the private sector that support innovation are also crucial to generate solutions for gender equality. Finally, it is important for UN Women to invest in more comprehensive and organized systems that can capture lessons in the process of piloting innovation, and to decide on the best structure to support its innovation work.

The management response and action plan presented by UN Women acknowledges the need to use this evaluation to develop UN Women's innovation for gender equality agenda based on what has been achieved until now and to build on lessons learned. It confirms UN Women's commitment to learning from its experience and assimilating gender-responsive evidence of what works and what does not in order to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment.



**Lisa Sutton**

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# ACRONYMS

<b>AGCCI</b>	African Girls Can Code Initiative
<b>BFW</b>	Buy from Women platform
<b>BPS</b>	Banco de Previsión Social
<b>COVID-19</b>	2019 novel coronavirus disease
<b>DAMS</b>	Donor Agreement Management System
<b>DKK</b>	Danish krone
<b>FIDEIMAS</b>	National Social Development Institute/IMAS
<b>FinLab</b>	Financial Innovation Lab
<b>IEAS</b>	Independent Evaluation and Audit Services
<b>IES</b>	Independent Evaluation Service
<b>NOK</b>	Norwegian krone
<b>RMS</b>	Results Management System
<b>STEM</b>	science, technology, engineering and mathematics
<b>UNCDF</b>	United Nations Capital Development Fund
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNIN</b>	United Nations Innovation Network
<b>USSD</b>	Unstructured supplementary service data
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# CORPORATE FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF UN WOMEN'S APPROACH TO INNOVATION

Photo ©UN Women Africa / Senegal - Buy from women

Innovation, technology and the identification of new solutions are critical to accelerate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. As such, **innovation is increasingly being prioritized within the development work of the United Nations system** and the wider international development community. Within this context, UN Women has sharpened its focus on innovation in recent years, based on the recognition that innovation and innovation in technology, which frequently do not benefit men and women equally, can potentially be leveraged for women's empowerment. This effort has involved engaging in normative and coordination activities to advance gender equality goals within global, regional and national frameworks and initiatives on innovation, as well as developing innovative programming to trial new solutions to address gender equality at the national and regional levels.

Although there is no overarching innovation strategy within UN Women, work to more systematically integrate innovation within the organization's activities is currently under way as part of the strategic planning process. The UN Women Strategic Plan 2018–2021 and the draft Strategic Framework for the UN Women Strategic Plan 2022–2025 both highlight the growing influence and opportunity that innovation and technology offer for UN Women's work. As evidence of this, a review of projects in the UN Women internal results management system with the word "innovation", "innovative" or "innovate" in their project or activity description identified a total of 87 projects, representing a total budget of approximately US\$6.5 million.

## Evaluation purpose and focus

The evaluation was formative in nature and intended to support ongoing strategic decision-making regarding how UN Women can drive innovation for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. It was also intended to inform and strengthen organizational learning and accountability in this area.

Specifically, the purpose of the evaluation was to define, assess and provide forward-looking recommendations on: (1) what innovation means for UN Women, (2) the value added of UN Women's normative and coordination work in the area of innovation for gender equality, (3) the results of UN Women's innovation initiatives and (4) the systems, processes and culture of UN Women to support innovation. The evaluation covered the period 2017–2020.

## Methodology and limitations

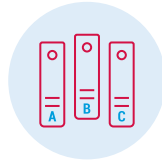
The main limitation the evaluation faced was the fact that innovative initiatives are not systematically reported on or categorized. As a result, there was no reliable source of data regarding the extent, nature and budget of innovative work. To overcome this limitation, the evaluation team identified all projects labelled as "innovative" within the UN Women internal OneApp dashboard and used these as an initial basis for analysis. Inception interviews were also used to identify innovative initiatives that would serve as valuable case studies. It is important to note that this was a formative evaluation intending to assess an emerging area in UN Women. The evaluation focused on UN Women's approach to innovation and did not review the innovation facility. This was decided at the scoping stage and based on a parallel review conducted by the main donor of the innovation facility.





### Methodology

The evaluation was **utilization-focused** and employed **theory-based** and **outcome-harvesting** approaches. The evaluation was **gender responsive** and carried out in accordance with the United Nations Evaluation Group Norms and Standards and Ethical Code of Conduct and the UN Women Evaluation Policy and Guidelines. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the evaluation was conducted entirely **remotely** and adopted a **mixed-methods approach** for data collection.



### Data collected

Review and analysis of over **220 documents**  
**62 virtual interviews** with UN Women staff and external stakeholders  
**Rapid survey** of UN Women units and offices  
**5 light-touch case studies** of innovation initiatives, including the Building Blocks/Blockchain programme, the Buy from Women platform, four initiatives in the area of social innovation, the EQUALS Global Partnership, and the African Girls Can Code Initiative (AGCCI)



### Reconstructed Theory of Change

As UN Women had no explicit theory of change for its work on innovation, the evaluation team reconstructed a theory of change during the inception phase. This was used as the **overarching theory to understand how change happens** in this area of work, and to inform analysis regarding whether and **how innovative actions and outputs contribute to outcomes and results** at multiple levels.

## FINDINGS

The evaluation **found that there is no clear and widely shared definition of innovation within UN Women**, nor is there a common vision of how innovation should be integrated into UN Women's work. Although an innovation strategy was developed in 2017, it was not widely disseminated or used. As a result, the definitions of "innovation" used by personnel are generally inconsistent, with the term applied loosely to describe a disparate set of activities, approaches and results. However, there are a few common patterns. Most notably, there is a strong conflation of innovation with technology and a tendency to label any technological solution as innovative. In addition, any solution that is new to UN Women or is applied for the first time in a new context is often labelled as innovative. This allows even quite standard approaches to be defined as innovative.

The absence of a clear definition and vision for innovation has resulted in a piecemeal approach in which the extent and nature of innovative work depends on the interests of individual personnel. The identification of innovative initiatives is also highly inconsistent, and there is no standard framework to guide, monitor, report on or learn from innovative work. This evaluation found that it would be useful for UN Women to adopt a clear definition of innovation that has both a process and output element.

UN Women's **lack of a clear definition of innovation has significant repercussions on how activities are categorized within internal UN Women information management systems**, with categorization largely left to individual judgment. This ad hoc approach compromises the organization's ability to obtain accurate programme analytics. The evaluation found that clearly defined subcategories for innovation and criteria for categorization are needed to improve information management. It identified four high-level categories that could be used to classify different components of innovation: digital/technological innovation, social innovation, innovative partnerships and frontier technology.

The evaluation found that **UN Women does not currently play a significant role in normative and coordination work on gender and innovation, although it has the potential to do so**. However, there were some notable exceptions where UN Women has a prominent role in normative and coordination work on innovation, including through the Generation Equality Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation and the EQUALS Global Partnership.

Despite current limited engagement in this area, the evaluation found that there is both opportunity and appetite for UN Women to step up its normative and coordination work on gender and innovation by building on its existing strengths, expertise and credibility. Indeed, given the organization's limited resources and operational programming in innovation, developing a stronger focus on normative and coordination work could be a crucial way to influence larger innovation actors and support impact at scale. The evaluation also found that the organization could add value by developing evidence and guidance on gender equality and innovation that can inform the work of partners and noted that UN Women should reflect on how to engage with the private sector as part of its normative and coordination work on gender and innovation.

**UN Women lacks technical capacity to identify and mitigate challenges specific to the implementation of technology-based innovative initiatives.** A number of technology-based innovative initiatives lacked proper needs assessments and problem-identification processes and were implemented without sufficient technical expertise, resulting in challenges and blockages during implementation. Some initiatives were also found to have been driven primarily by a desire to utilize a certain type of technology that was perceived as innovative, without sufficient consideration of whether it was the most suitable or sustainable method to address a given gender equality problem. In contrast, social innovation initiatives generally involved an analysis of why existing solutions for gender equality problems were not working, followed by systematic needs assessments and problem-identification processes to identify potential new solutions to be trialled.

Although scaling up innovative initiatives has been a challenge, there is greater potential to support impact at scale when UN Women contributes to the development of innovative approaches that can be scaled up by others.

The evaluation found that few UN Women innovative initiatives have achieved any significant scale. For example, all of the country platforms of Buy from Women remain in the pilot or design phase, despite this initiative having been launched in 2016. In addition, the Building Blocks/Blockchain initiative serves 400 women<sup>1</sup> and is considered by personnel involved in the programme to be fully scaled.

Given UN Women's small size and limited funds, it is currently not well placed to take innovative programmes to scale and needs to be realistic about the role it can play. The evaluation found that scaling up innovative work is most likely to be achieved where:

- UN Women undertakes a small innovative research and pilot project, the findings from which will inform larger programmes or actions supported by others. For example, UN Women developed behaviourally informed messages in partnership with a large national agency in Uruguay that will now roll out and scale up this messaging as part of its wider communication activities.
- UN Women develops an innovative model that is adopted and replicated by others. For example, the African Girls Can Code Initiative developed a model of coding camps for girls that has been replicated in different ways by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and others.
- UN Women's innovative initiatives are integrated with government systems and aligned with government priorities. For example, the Buy from Women platform in Costa Rica is being developed by UN Women but will be hosted by a national trust fund and integrated with its wider services.

**UN Women is trialling alternative solutions to gender equality problems, although some of these solutions are not genuinely "new".** Innovative work in UN Women has involved recognizing that some traditional solutions are not working and trialling alternative solutions, as well as developing new solutions to respond to emerging problems. These solutions have focused particularly on empowerment, social norm change and harnessing digital tools. However, there are questions about the extent to which the innovative solutions being trialled are genuine innovation. While the technologies or approaches are new to UN Women, in some cases they are already being used elsewhere, including to address gender equality issues. For example, Buy from Women is an e-commerce and e-learning platform with a gender focus, but staff working on the initiative disagreed about whether it is innovative or simply an adaptation of existing e-commerce and e-learning tools.

<sup>1</sup> After the evaluation was completed, it was reported that the UN Women's refugee camp-based Oases direct cash assistance programme transitioned to the blockchain modality reaching up to 1200 women by 2021.



**The evaluation found that there is no systematic organizational learning from these trials, and that these trials are not contributing to evidence-based programming.**

The trialling of alternative solutions is taking place in ad hoc and disconnected ways within different parts of UN Women and lacks a rigorous approach to capturing and disseminating lessons. While sharing and learning about innovative work sometimes takes place at the programme or regional level, there is no organization-wide approach to identify, track, document and learn about these new solutions. As a result, UN Women is not using these initiatives to develop a body of knowledge that can be used to inform decisions about which innovative solutions the organization should invest in or promote.

it was widely recognized among UN Women personnel that private sector partnerships can offer new ideas, approaches, expertise, tools and resources for innovation.

**Innovation and the development of digital initiatives can enable UN Women to reach a greater number of people and have more impact with its limited resources.**

This was observed by a number of Country Offices during the COVID-19 pandemic, when much activity moved online. However, in order to do more with less through digital engagement it is critical to ensure meaningful access, uptake and effectiveness of digital initiatives, which was not always present in the case studies covered by this evaluation.

Overall, the evaluation found that innovating to identify new solutions to gender equality challenges and influencing other larger actors to take solutions to scale is the most effective investment of UN Women's limited resources. It cited examples of such a catalytic approach, for example the social innovation initiatives in Uruguay and Georgia and the Buy from Women platform in Costa Rica. In these cases, small amounts of funding for research or piloting work have led to innovative approaches being taken up by larger actors, with potential to generate significant impact from this initial investment.

The evaluation found **that supportive systems and structures are not in place to enable innovation in UN Women.**

Personnel identified slow and restrictive organizational processes as significant constraints to innovation. These include slow procurement processes specifically tailored to innovative initiatives, insufficient partnerships and inadequate partnership frameworks, inadequate legal frameworks to support innovative initiatives, lack of support from management, inadequate reporting systems, and limited knowledge-sharing platforms. Critically, there are no corporate systems to measure or report on innovation, nor accountability frameworks, which limits the ability of the organization to understand what is or is not working.

Despite these organization-wide limitations, the evaluation found some regional examples of strong coordination and support for innovative work. For example, the Arab States Regional Office has an Innovation and Advocacy Specialist who works in a cross-cutting manner. The Europe and Central Asia Regional Office has initiated Innovation Conversations, Innovation Bootcamps and Dialogues with dedicated personnel and commitment from leadership. Similarly, leadership in the Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office has been encouraging personnel to work in innovative ways. However, the majority of offices and units reported that they do not have dedicated innovation personnel.

**The extent to which UN Women's innovative initiatives reach marginalized women is mixed, with digital innovation presenting particular barriers to access.**

Some innovative initiatives examined by this evaluation clearly involved outreach to marginalized women. For example, the African Girls Can Code Initiative worked with marginalized girls who had not previously had access to any technology, and the social innovation initiatives focusing on violence against women in

Georgia and Moldova demonstrated potential to reach the most marginalized women. However, there was no evidence that the other initiatives studied for this evaluation would increase outreach to marginalized women.

The evaluation identified an inherent tension between using digital tools and reaching the most marginalized women, who face multiple barriers to accessing these tools. Buy from Women is a clear example, as it is unlikely that many poor or marginalized women will be able to use the platform because they lack Internet connectivity, electricity, literacy and digital literacy. Likewise, although marginalized girls were the main beneficiary of the African Girls Can Code Initiative, most of these girls did not have access to the Internet at home. Efforts to overcome such barriers, for example providing laptops to beneficiaries, were not always realistic and sustainable.

**Work on innovation has potential to engage more diverse partners, particularly from the private sector. However, UN Women currently lacks capacity to develop such partnerships at organization-wide level.**

The evaluation found evidence of some successful private sector partnerships at country level for technology-focused initiatives. However, a number of headquarters staff suggested that UN Women lacks the capacity to build effective partnerships with the private sector on an organization-wide basis. They stressed that building relationships and trust requires a long time and a significant investment and advised caution with regard to the potential for reputational risk. However,

The evaluation found that the **current organizational culture within UN Women does not optimally support innovation**. There is an unwillingness to take risks or accept failure, and a lack of agility to learn and adapt, all of which are vital for innovation and experimentation. The evaluation highlighted that innovation requires personnel who are open-minded, flexible, committed to trying something new and willing to invest time working with complex internal processes, as well as the need to attract such personnel. Innovation also requires leadership that is openly supportive of experimentation and innovation.

There is limited space within the organization to discuss, share knowledge and learn about innovation. Moreover, the innovation ecosystem in UN Women is not well understood by internal UN Women stakeholders, thus hampering the possibility to develop internal networks or foster new ideas.

### Lessons

#### UN Women has an important role to play in the normative and coordination space of innovation for gender equality.

There is currently no entity in the United Nations system taking the lead on innovation for gender equality, and there is an opportunity for UN Women to take on this role, building on its expertise and credibility.

#### Despite staff and leadership enthusiasm for innovation, efforts are not mainstreamed and have so far tended to be piecemeal and small in scale.

Innovative initiatives have been small and led by Country Offices rather than embedded in an organization-wide approach. Innovation requires collaboration and knowledge-sharing across all levels of the organization, including cross-sectoral dialogue at headquarters, Regional Offices and Country Offices.

#### Lack of a clear and agreed definition of innovation is hindering UN Women's efforts to be effective in this space.

Innovation was commonly conflated with technology or used to describe solutions that were not genuinely innovative. There is demand for a clear definition of innovation that includes both processes and outputs.

#### UN Women's organizational structures, culture and systems are not optimally enabling its work in innovation.

Current organizational processes do not enable the flexible and agile approach that is required for experimentation, and the organizational culture does not encourage smart risk-taking.

#### There is potential for the private sector to be a strong partner in UN Women's future innovation work.

Engagement will likely require investment in internal expertise to guide the organization in working effectively with the private sector.

## CONCLUSIONS

**The absence of a clear definition and vision for innovation within UN Women has hampered the organization from developing a coherent and strategic body of work in this area.** As a result, innovative work within UN Women is currently a disparate and disconnected set of activities, often driven by individual interests or in response to ad hoc opportunities. Furthermore, innovative initiatives vary widely in the extent to which they adopt a genuinely innovative or experimental approach and offer new solutions, and there is no framework for measuring results or sharing learning.

There is a strong demand for a clear definition, vision, strategy and guidance on innovation that can help inform action and measure success. It would be useful to develop a definition of innovation that encompasses both ways of working and the nature of solutions.

#### UN Women has not yet clearly identified how it can best add value in the area of innovation for gender equality.

The evaluation concluded that the organization has potential to add most value by fostering new solutions to gender equality challenges and by informing and influencing the innovative work of other actors, and that it should focus its efforts in these two areas.

The innovative initiatives that appear to have the greatest potential for impact are those where the organization has developed and incubated an experimental new solution to a gender equality problem, has accompanied this with rigorous learning and documentation, and has influenced other, larger actors to adopt and scale up this solution. This incubation role is appropriate in terms of the organization's limited resources and its in-depth expertise on gender equality. UN Women can also add significant value by leading normative and coordination work on innovation for gender equality and acting as a knowledge provider for others on these issues. This role fits well with the organization's mandate.

**UN Women's innovative work is not yet having a significant impact because the organization is not building in plans for scale up and learning. Critically, while some innovative initiatives are generating intermediate outcomes at programme level, they are not contributing to higher level outcomes at organization-wide level.**

The organization's ability to scale up innovative programmes has been constrained by a lack of capacity, resources and strategy, resulting in limited impact from most innovative initiatives. While innovative initiatives are generating a variety of outcomes at programme level, these intermediate outcomes do not clearly contribute to higher level outcomes at organizational level because learning from this innovative work is not being used to inform wider UN Women strategies.

To ensure maximum value from UN Women's innovative work, it is critical that the organization puts in place measures that will enable intermediate outcomes from innovative programmes to contribute to wider results and goals. This requires organization-wide systems to capture, document and share lessons from innovative projects and to ensure that these lessons inform future programming, coordination and influencing activities.

**There are internal barriers to innovation within UN Women that need to be addressed in order for the organization to work more efficiently in this area. These include barriers related to organizational systems and to a risk-averse organizational culture around innovation.**

At almost all levels of the organization, innovative work is hampered because organizational systems and processes are not adapted to support innovative ways of working. In particular, these systems lack the agility to support innovation. Moreover, UN Women's organizational culture is not conducive to innovation. With some exceptions, there is little experimentation or acceptance of smart risk-taking and the possibility of failure, little space for innovation-related dialogue and collaboration, and limited innovation mindset among personnel. In this context, innovation is not fostered, and there is no space for a frank discussion and learning when experimental work fails.

Innovative work can generate new types of partnerships for UN Women, involving different categories of partners and different models of collaboration. While such partnerships currently exist within certain innovative programmes, there is potential to develop these at organizational level.

**Innovative initiatives within UN Women have involved new types of partnership arrangements with traditional and non-traditional partners. Innovative work has also involved partnering with a wider range of actors, in particular with the private sector, which can provide valuable ideas, expertise and resources for innovative work on gender equality at scale.**

There is potential to move beyond programme-level partnerships and develop organizational-level, long-term partnerships with the private sector that can generate new solutions for gender equality and opportunities to scale up. This will require investing in the organization's capacity to engage and build relationships with private sector actors in the innovation field. UN Women therefore will need to invest in internal expertise, tools and procedures in this area, as well as dedicate significant time and resources to building trust, credibility and strong relationships with private sector actors in the innovation field.

## Recommendations

**UN Women should develop and disseminate a clear definition of innovation.** This should cover what constitutes an innovative solution and how innovation happens. It should be accompanied by a concrete strategy, priorities and an accountability framework. The organization should develop a clear structure with allocated resources for leadership and accountability on innovation.

**UN Women should identify the value added of its work in the normative and coordination space related to innovation.** UN Women should ensure that innovation is thoughtfully integrated into gender equality initiatives and that UN Women's work in innovation is positively influencing the normative sphere.

**UN Women should focus on developing, trialling and documenting innovative solutions for challenging gender equality problems or solutions with potential for greatest impact, and on influencing other actors to adopt and scale up solutions that prove effective.** This approach would enable UN Women to develop evidence about what works and to influence larger actors to adopt effective new solutions for maximum scale and impact.

**UN Women should develop long-term, strategic partnerships with the private sector that support innovation through the transfer of ideas, expertise and resources.** These should include organizational-level partnerships with private sector actors that can generate new solutions for gender equality and opportunities to scale up, and country- and regional-level opportunities for engagement.

**UN Women should invest in more comprehensive and organized systems for capturing and sharing lessons learned in the process of piloting/testing innovative initiatives.** This will foster organizational learning and give UN Women the knowledge and credibility to influence other actors in the area of innovation for gender equality.

**UN Women should decide on the best structure to support innovation, match it with appropriate systems (policy, procedures, measurement frameworks) and embrace a culture of innovation.** This decision can be informed by the availability of human resources and evidence from the current instances of working arrangements that support innovation.





Photo © UN Women Americas and the Caribbean

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

The Corporate Formative Evaluation of UN Women's approach to innovation (2017-2020) was conducted by the UN Women Independent Evaluation Service. Its purpose was to assemble information and provide a package of recommendations for devising a UN Women strategy and approach to innovation that includes both social and technological innovation. It serves as a forward-looking evaluation to learn from experience and as input to the development of the UN Women Strategic Plan 2022-2025. The evaluation was conducted in parallel to the work of the management-led Project Team on Emerging Priorities for the development of the UN Women Strategic Plan 2022-2025. The management Sub-Team on Innovation and Technology for the development of the Strategic Plan served as the Reference Group for this evaluation.

## 2. Gender, innovation and technology context

Recent years have seen an increased focus on the role of innovation in international development. The aid community is increasingly “doing development” in a digital world, and interventions reflect this. Innovation for development is about identifying new approaches and effective solutions that add value for the men, women, girls and boys affected by development challenges<sup>2</sup>. Within innovation, technology can act as a powerful catalyst, supercharging the impact and reach of development initiatives and accelerating progress towards sustainable development outcomes. Gender equality is a key component in these efforts, as women are disproportionately affected across the development spectrum, from economic opportunity to health care to climate change. As development efforts increasingly seek innovative approaches to accelerate progress, it is important to pay close attention to persistent gender inequalities to ensure that rather than exacerbating or maintaining the status quo, these efforts are gender responsive and result in more equitable lives for women. United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 9 makes a call “to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.” For the fourth industrial revolution to be socially and economically transformative for women, this process must be aware of, and engage with, gender perspectives. The rapid move towards digital access to work, education and services that has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic in many parts of the world has highlighted how critical it is that innovation and technology is gender responsive and offers opportunities for women, rather than exacerbating existing patterns of exclusion.

It is widely recognized that empowering women can generate substantial progress in prosperity and development. In a recent report, the International Development Innovation Alliance found that achieving gender parity across just five key sectors – water, contraception, telecommunications, energy and childcare – could open up an additional US\$300 billion in incremental annual spending by 2025.<sup>3</sup> This finding increases the imperative to harness innovation to improve women’s lives and livelihoods. Understanding women’s roles in innovation and entrepreneurship is central to this equation. It is not enough that women are merely recipients of innovation; it is crucial to better understand how gendered norms impact the process of innovation.

For women, technological innovation can offer a means to information and opportunities that have not always been available to them, providing access to healthcare, education, financial inclusion, commercial opportunities and many other life-enhancing services. It has enabled women to participate in this increasingly digital technology-driven world – both benefitting from and contributing to it.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, non-technological innovation can also be harnessed to advance gender equality, with better research and design enabling practitioners to better understand and address long-standing problems. For example, human-centred design, agile tactics and behavioural design have revealed new understanding and approaches to addressing persistent gender-related challenges. Such insights are particularly valuable with regard to pervasive and deeply entrenched patterns of gender inequality.

However, innovation that is not responsive to women’s experiences and needs also poses a range of risks for women, from exclusion from new economic opportunities to online abuse or other harms. As traditional manufacturing and industrial practices are increasingly automated with digital technology, it is important to note that women are underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reports that just 28 per cent of engineering graduates and 40 per cent of computer science and informatics graduates are women<sup>5</sup>. This is further demonstrated in the global labor market, where women hold less than a quarter of all digital sector jobs.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, machine learning and other forms of artificial intelligence<sup>7</sup> can perpetuate, and even amplify, existing gender biases. Ensuring inclusive and diverse design teams can help tackle this issue.

There are many different factors driving the gender digital gap, including cost, access, connectivity and electricity. However, there is one key factor that has an outsized impact on women’s access to innovative technology: gendered social norms. These are the different roles and expectations prescribed to men and women, and these norms do not always support women’s use of innovation or technology. In fact, when these norms are ignored, the introduction of new ways of thinking and new technology can disrupt power relations within a household or community, negatively impacting a woman’s life and jeopardizing

2 UNDP Innovation Facility (2016) 2016 Year in Review. p 2. Available at [https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/innovation/Annual\\_Report\\_2016.pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/innovation/Annual_Report_2016.pdf)

3 International Development Innovation Alliance (IDIA), Toward Bridging Gender Equality & Innovation.

4 Equals Global Partnership, <https://www.equals.org/about-us>.

5 UNESCO. (2021, February 10) UNESCO research shows women career scientists still face gender bias. Para 1. Available at <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-research-shows-women-career-scientists-still-face-gender-bias>

6 UNESCO (2019) I’d blush if I could: closing gender divides in digital skills through education. p. 24. Available at <https://en.unesco.org/ld-blush-if-i-could>.

7 World Economic Forum. January 2020. The reskilling revolution can transform the future of work for women. Available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/women-reskilling-revolution-future-of-work/>



her safety.<sup>8</sup> It is imperative that approaches for introducing innovation or technology to women take into consideration these often-delicate power structures.







The SDGs are a set of 17 goals that offer a “shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet.” They were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015.<sup>9</sup> SDG 5 is centred around gender equality and women’s empowerment. Through its nine targets, it seeks to create a more equitable world for women and girls. Target 5.b is focused on technology, aspiring to “enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.” Regarding STEM, the SDGs specifically address educational issues pertaining to women and girls through Goal 4, Target 5: “By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training.” Additionally, Targets 9.c and 17.8 are focused on technology, with Target 9.c aiming to “significantly increase access to information

and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020.”

Across the United Nations system, many agencies have a robust and established footprint in innovation within their programming. Founded in 2015, the [UN Innovation Network \(UNIN\)](#) is a community of practice consisting of personnel from 29 different United Nations agencies and jointly chaired by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP). By convening to share expertise and best practices, this community aims to advance innovation within the United Nations system in order to make progress towards achieving the SDGs. It also engages with senior United Nations leadership and provides guidance on creating structures to actively promote innovation across the organization.

Several UNIN members have a considerable focus on innovation and gender, as shown in Table 1.

**TABLE 1. United Nations agencies focus on innovation with brief notes relates to gender equality**

	<p><b>UNICEF</b></p> <p>The original home for innovation within the United Nations cluster system, UNICEF now channels its efforts through its Office of Innovation, which is focused on “doing new things to solve problems and improve the lives of children around the world.” This has included creating and distributing a gamified, educational menstruation-tracking app for girl children in Indonesia.</p>
	<p><b>WFP</b></p> <p>Through the <a href="#">Innovation Accelerator</a>, WFP deploys “bold new tools and approaches across its global operations” to achieve SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.” This has included using blockchain technology to securely deliver cash payments to women.</p>
	<p><b>UNDP</b></p> <p>With support from Denmark, UNDP’s <a href="#">Innovation Facility</a> was established to identify “more effective solutions that add value for the people affected by development challenges.” The facility’s current portfolio includes initiatives to advance gender equality.</p>
	<p><b>UNCDF</b></p> <p>The United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) operates the Financial Innovation Lab (FinLab) “to find and support solutions that help to promote inclusive and connected digital economies” and catalyze “digital innovation for financial inclusion”. Outside of FinLab, UNCDF has a significant focus on gender programming and women’s empowerment around financial inclusion, to deliver on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.</p>
	<p><b>UNFPA</b></p> <p>Through the Innovation Fund, UNFPA works to “inclusively creating and scaling-up data-driven, sustainable and open solutions that accelerate the achievement of transformative results in the lives of women, adolescents and youth”.</p>
	<p><b>UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY- GENERAL</b></p> <p>United Nations Global Pulse is “the United Nations Secretary-General’s initiative on big data and artificial intelligence for development, humanitarian action and peace”. This effort includes a focus on gender and algorithmic biases in data.</p>

Source: Compiled by the evaluation team.

8 Global System for Mobile Communication (GSMA) Women. May 2014. Women in Agriculture: A Toolkit for Mobile Services Practitioners. Available at [https://www.findevgateway.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/women\\_in\\_agriculture-a\\_toolkit\\_for\\_mobile\\_services\\_practitioners.pdf](https://www.findevgateway.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/women_in_agriculture-a_toolkit_for_mobile_services_practitioners.pdf).

9 United Nations, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.



## 2.1 UN Women's strategic frameworks: focus on innovation and on innovation in technology

UN Women is the United Nations entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women. It is the global champion for gender equality, working to develop and uphold standards and create an environment in which every woman and girl can exercise her human rights and live up to her full potential.

UN Women works to support the achievement of the SDGs and recognizes innovation as a precondition to accelerate the SDGs for all. It recognizes that innovation does not always benefit everyone equally, and specifically does not benefit women and men equally. UN Women's work in innovation has been guided by several key frameworks, which have sought to articulate and deepen the Entity's thinking around how these can be leveraged to further women's empowerment. As the world becomes increasingly digitized, core programmatic themes have progressively intersected with digital tools and approaches.

This is seen in different UN Women programming frameworks. Some frameworks are specifically focused on innovation or technology and innovation (Making Innovation and Technology Work for Women<sup>10</sup>, Innovation for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment<sup>11</sup>, Innovation for Gender Equality, Information, Communication and Technology Strategy 2018–2021), while the core strategic plans (UN Women Strategic Plan 2018–2021<sup>12</sup>, Draft Strategic Framework for UN Women Strategic Plan 2022–2025<sup>13</sup> have highlighted the growing influence and opportunity that innovation and innovation in technology offer to specific UN Women work streams and activities.

## 2.2 UN Women's internal innovation work organizational priorities

UN Women has identified a number of barriers that contribute towards creating and sustaining the gender gap in innovation and innovation in technology including: (1) limited market awareness and investment in innovations that meet the needs of women, (2) a gender-blind approach to innovation, (3) under-representation of women as innovators and entrepreneurs and (4) a perceived high-risk, low-reward profile of investing in innovations for women and girls, particularly those from marginalized groups.<sup>14</sup>

UN Women prioritized innovation as one of the “drivers of change” within its Strategic Plan 2018–2021. Output 3 of the Organizational Effectiveness and Efficiency Framework

2018-2021 articulates that innovation is measured by UN Women as “high quality of programmes through knowledge, innovation, results-based management and evaluation.” This was conceptualized in the 2017 Innovation Strategy document<sup>15</sup>, the main areas of interventions of which included: (1) developing the market for innovations that advance gender equality and women's empowerment, (2) promoting a gender-responsive approach to the innovation cycle, (3) promoting innovations created by women, for women and (4) de-risking high-impact innovations that benefit marginalized women. UN Women continues to prioritize innovation in the forthcoming Strategic Plan 2022-2025, which states that “Across all areas, there will be increased focus on leveraging innovation and digital technology to accelerate results”. This will include “catalysing new sources of finance and financial innovations such as gender bonds”, as well as “efforts to close the gender digital divide, to increase the number of women working in technology and innovation and to stop online violence and disinformation.”<sup>16</sup>

The evaluation team noted that the UN Women Results Management System (RMS) includes almost 400 interventions that have been tagged as innovative. These cover a wide geographical range and are categorized as social or technological innovation.

## 2.3 Portfolio analysis

Through a thorough analysis of UN Women's financial reporting systems, including the OneApp Project Delivery Dashboard and Atlas, the evaluation team was able to generate estimated budget/delivery data for several key projects in UN Women's innovation portfolio. However, the financial analysis of UN Women's approach to innovation to date was constrained by the limitations of the organization's financial reporting systems and the lack of organized systematic data pertaining to innovation work. For example, the evaluation team was unable to procure a definitive list of project identification numbers and/or titles of innovation initiatives. With no Strategic Plan Output directly linked to innovation, the team had to rely on a keyword search of project and activity descriptions in the OneApp dashboard based on the preliminary definition and scope of innovation determined during the inception phase in order to generate a best estimate of budgetary data.

10 UN Women, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/9/making-innovation-and-technology-work-for-women>.

11 UN Women, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/03/innovation-for-gender-equality>.

12 UN Women, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/executive-board/documents/strategic-plan-2018-2021>.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 While a strategy around innovation was developed, there were issues noted in its eventual dissemination and use.

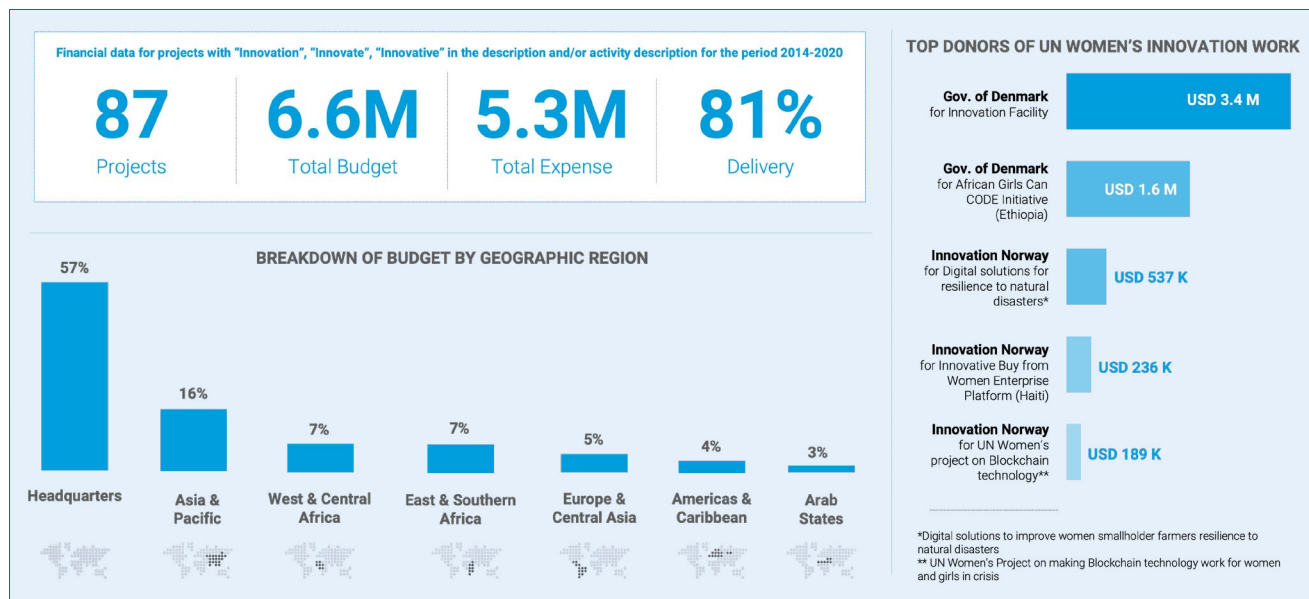
16 Text extracted from the draft UN Women Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

The evaluation team ran a search for projects with “innovation”, “innovative” and “innovate” in their project description and/or activity description. As Figure 1 illustrates, this search identified a total of 87 projects, with a total budget of US\$6,596,159.60, with the majority of the budget (57 per cent) made up of headquarters-based projects.

Through the Donor Agreement Management System (DAMS), the evaluation was able to identify six donor agreements directly linked to innovation. This was the most reliable financial information in terms of funding

for innovation at UN Women since 2017. Despite this, the evaluation did not specifically look at how UN Women had performed against these donor agreements. As Figure 1 shows, the top donors who provided funding to UN Women in support of innovation work for the period 2014–2020 were the Government of Denmark (contributions totaling DKK 35,554.455 – approximately USD \$5,748,714) and Innovation Norway (contributions totaling NOK 10,654,455 – approximately USD \$1,257,444<sup>17</sup>).

**FIGURE 1. Financial data for innovation (2017–2020)**



Source: OneApp, DAMS information compiled by the evaluation team.

### 3. Evaluation objectives, methods and tools

#### 3.1 Objectives

The Independent Evaluation Service evaluates the work of UN Women to enhance organizational accountability, provide evidence-based information for decision-making and contribute to learning on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

The purpose of the evaluation was to define, assess and provide forward-looking recommendations on: (1) what innovation means for UN Women; (2) the value added of UN Women’s normative and coordination work in the area of innovation for gender equality, (3) the results of UN Women’s innovation initiatives and (4) the systems, processes and culture of UN Women to support innovation, from 2017 to 2020.

The findings presented in this report should support strategic decision-making and organizational learning and accountability.

The findings should also inform UN Women’s approach as management solidifies innovation as a key emerging mechanism to achieve gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls.

The evaluation was formative, and its objectives were:

- To **provide key learning** and input to managers and programmatic personnel on what has been achieved in innovation to date.
- To **provide recommendations** for operational improvements and suggestions on how UN Women can best drive innovation for gender equality and women’s empowerment.
- To **inform the next UN Women Strategic Plan** and UN Women strategies and internal governance in the area of innovation.

### 3.2 Evaluation approach, methods and tools

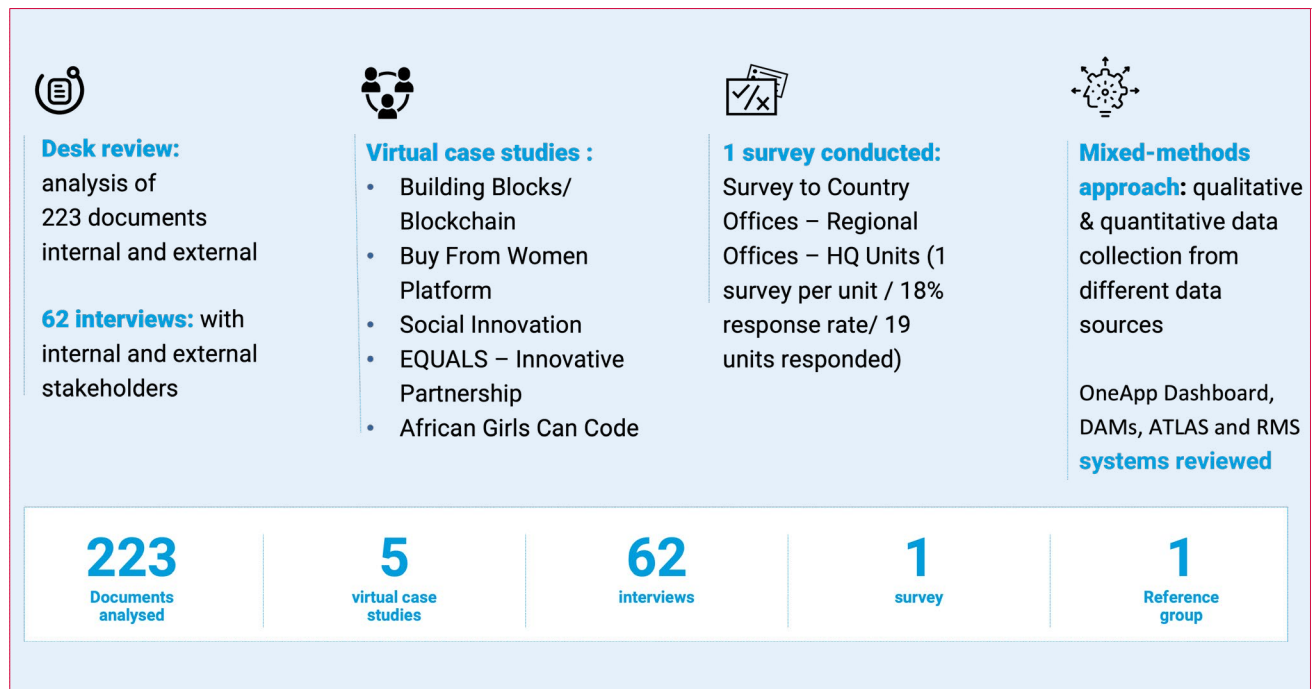
The evaluation was utilization-focused<sup>18</sup> and employed a theory-based and outcome-harvesting approaches<sup>19</sup> through case studies of initiatives that target innovation. It was carried out in accordance with United Nations Evaluation Group Norms and Standards and Ethical Code of Conduct and UN Women Evaluation Policy and Guidelines. UN Women evaluations are gender-responsive, meaning that both the process and analysis apply the key principles of a human rights-based approach, including disability perspectives.

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods data collection and analysis, driven by the evaluation questions and selected to provide the best evidence to UN Women. Recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic complicates

in-person data collection, the evaluation relied on virtual data collection. This was also constrained by the availability of stakeholders to participate in virtual interviews.

The evaluation used different qualitative data collection methods, including document review and analysis of over 220 documents, 62 interviews (56 women and 18 men), a rapid survey (one survey sent to each headquarters unit and field office to collect an aggregate response from unit personnel) (18 per cent response rate/19 units responding) and 5 light-touch case studies of innovation initiatives.<sup>20</sup> The case studies included: the Building Blocks/Blockchain programme, the Buy from Women platform, four initiatives in social innovation<sup>21</sup>, the EQUALS Global Partnership and the African Girls Can Code Initiative (AGCCI). A theory of change was reconstructed at the inception phase and validated during data collection.

**Figure 2. Data collection tools**



Source: compiled by the evaluation team

<sup>18</sup> Promotes intended use by intended users and a strong focus on participation of users throughout the evaluation process. Source: Patton MQ, Utilization-focused Evaluation, Sage Publications, 2008. Available online at: <http://www.sagepub.com/books/Book229324#tabview=toc>.

<sup>19</sup> Ricardo Wilson-Grau and Heather Britt (2014), Outcome Harvesting, Cairo, Egypt, Ford Foundation. Retrieved from [https://www.outcomemapping.ca/download/wilsongrau\\_en\\_Outcome%20Harvesting%20Brief\\_revised%20Nov%202013.pdf](https://www.outcomemapping.ca/download/wilsongrau_en_Outcome%20Harvesting%20Brief_revised%20Nov%202013.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Case studies were used to assess the degree of “innovation”, the outcomes from innovation and the factors that enabled innovation to take place.

<sup>21</sup> The four social innovation initiatives include: the Study on Behavioral Causes Acting as Barriers among Teachers to Intervention/Reporting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Georgia); Co-responsibility in Child Care: the Use of Part-Time Paid Parental Leave in Uruguay; Reducing Violence through Virtual Reality (Moldova); Empowering Survivors of Violence (Moldova).



### 3.3 Scope and Limitations

A series of limitations were identified at inception stage and mitigated throughout the evaluation. These included:

- The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting restrictions on travel created significant limitations for the evaluation, as field missions were still not possible. This limited the number of stakeholders consulted, particularly those that could be reached by phone or online platform, limiting the confidence in the reliability of interview data.
- It is important to note that this was a formative evaluation intending to assess an emerging area in UN Women. The evaluation focused on UN Women's approach to innovation and did not review the innovation facility. This was decided at the scoping stage and based on a parallel review being conducted by the main donor of the innovation facility.
- The evaluation was mainly informed by interview and survey to regional offices, country offices and headquarters units and thus did not examine business processes in detail.
- The absence of a counterfactual or a comparator meant that the evaluation could only go as far as estimating UN Women's contribution to innovation but has not been able to assess attribution. However, the application of a theory-based approach allowed the Evaluation Team to explore complexity and context and to map the casual pathways of change.
- There were gaps in data availability, particularly cross-comparable financial data as well as adequate categorization of innovation initiatives.

### 3.4 Theory of change validation analysis

UN Women currently has no explicit theory of change for its work on innovation. The 2017 Innovation Strategy refers to innovation disrupting "business as usual" as a precondition to accelerate achievement of the SDGs. Meanwhile, Output 3 of the Strategic Plan 2018–2022 states that innovation will contribute to high-quality programmes but does not provide detail on how this will happen or what the results will be. Beyond these general points, the organization had no clear vision of how its work on innovation contributes to the wider outcomes and goals that it seeks.

The evaluation team therefore sought to reconstruct a theory of change illustrating how work on innovation contributes to outcomes across UN Women's integrated mandate—operational, normative and UN system coordination. This reconstructed theory of change is based on interviews undertaken with a range of UN Women personnel during the inception phase, in which these personnel were asked how they think innovative approaches can enhance UN Women's work or contribute to achieving UN Women's goals. The reconstructed theory of change is therefore very much a reflection of implicit beliefs among UN Women personnel about how working innovatively adds value and helps support change, rather than a documented pathway of how innovative programming contributes to change.

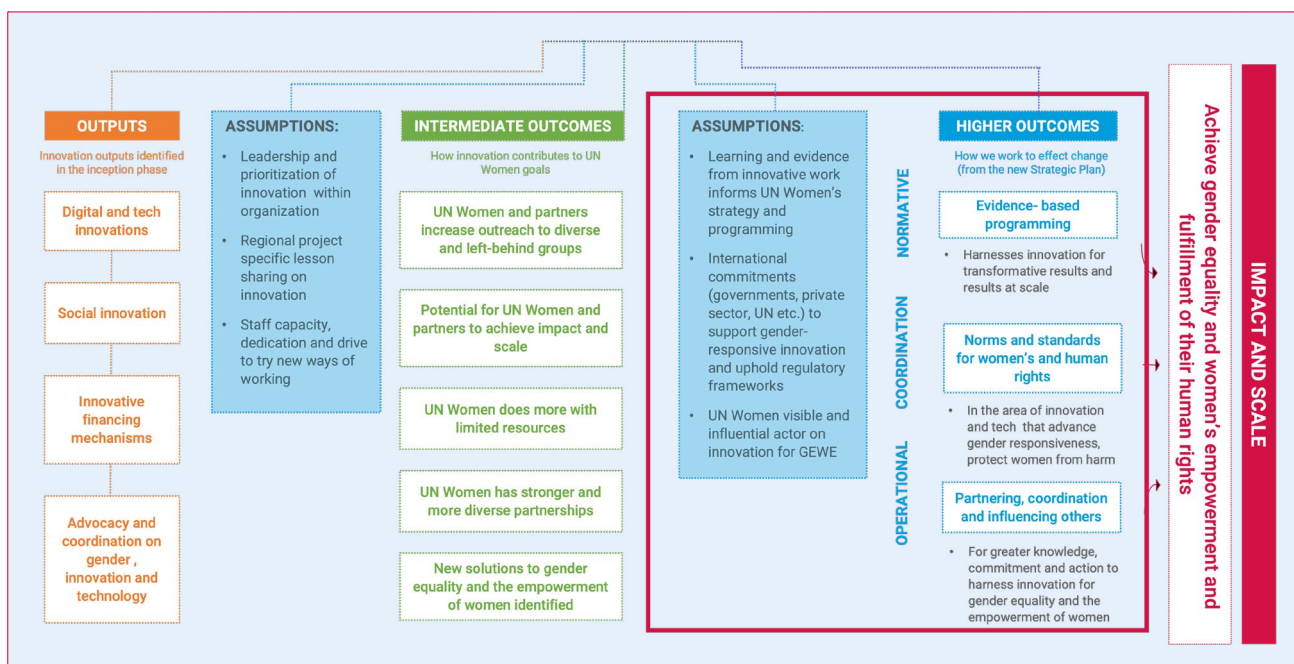
Figure 3 presents this theory of change. It includes the outputs and expected results chain from work on innovation, as well as the external factors (assumptions) that condition whether innovative work will deliver these expected results.

In the context of the conduct of this evaluation, UN Women personnel identified five key outputs that result from innovative work within UN Women: digital and other technological innovations, social innovations, innovative partnerships, innovative financing mechanisms, and advocacy and coordination on gender, innovation and technology.

The extent to which these outputs contribute to the intermediate outcomes identified by personnel is conditioned by three key factors: leadership and prioritization of innovation within UN Women; lesson-sharing on innovation at the regional or project-specific level; and personnel capacity, dedication and drive. The evaluation found that where these conditioning factors are in place, innovative outputs at the programmatic level do largely contribute to intermediate outcomes. However, it is important to note that the extent to which these factors are in place is inconsistent and varies significantly between regions and programmes. The evaluation therefore found that the left side of the theory of change was largely validated during the data collection phase.

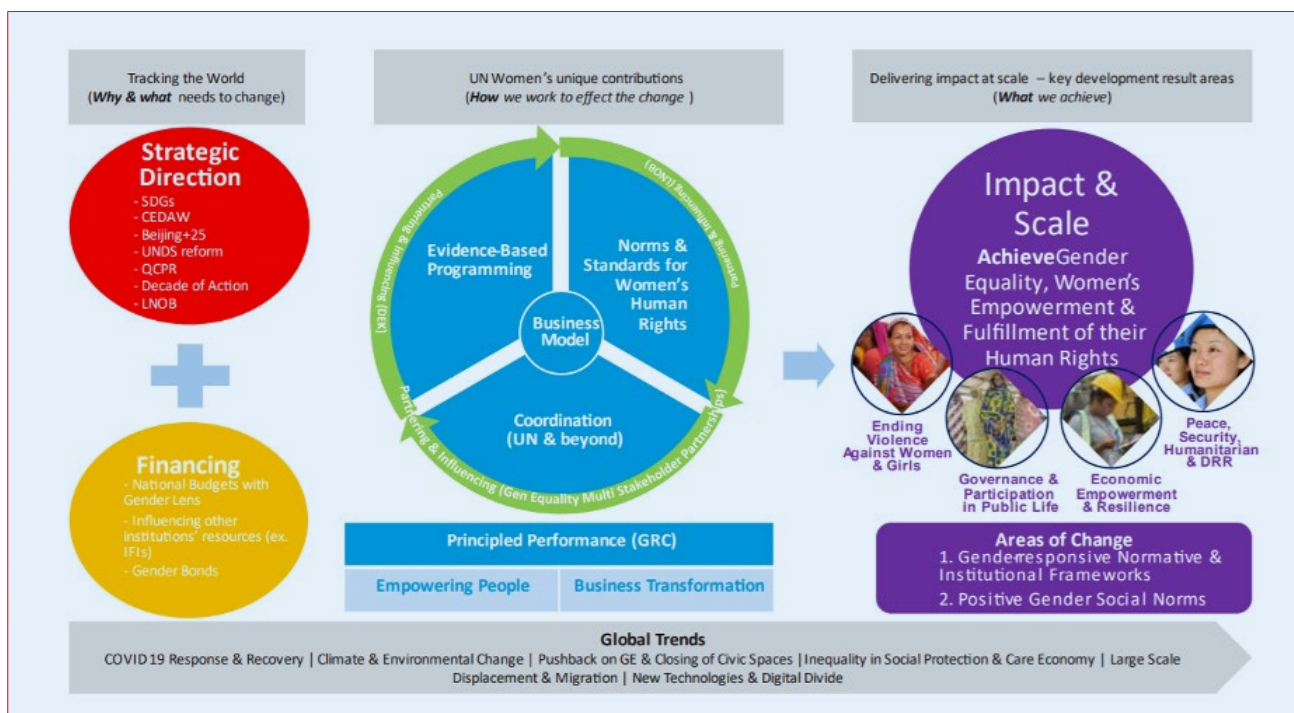
In order to examine the contribution of intermediate-level outcomes to higher-level outcomes, the evaluation team drew on the UN Women's value proposition graphic that is outlined in the draft Strategic Plan 2022–2025.

**FIGURE 3. Theory of change for UN Women’s innovation approach**



Source: Created by the evaluation team on the basis of the inception phase.

**FIGURE 4. UN Women’s value proposition, draft Strategic Plan 2022–2025**



Source: UN Women Draft Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

Based on this graphic, the evaluation team took “UN Women’s unique contributions” as the higher-level outcomes to which innovation should be contributing. These are: evidence-based operational programming (operational); norms and standards for women’s human rights (normative); and partnering, coordination and influencing

others (coordination). It also took “Impact and Scale” as the ultimate goal that UN Women is seeking to achieve. The evaluation then examined the potential of innovative outputs and intermediate outcomes to contribute to these higher-level outcomes and ultimate goal.

The evaluation identified that the intermediate-level outcomes from innovative work have potential to contribute to these higher-level outcomes and overall goal by:

- **Harnessing innovation** for transformative results and results at scale (operational);
- **Advancing norms and standards** for women's human rights in the area of innovation and technology (normative); and
- **Generating greater knowledge**, commitment and action among others to harness innovation for gender equality and women's empowerment (coordination).

However, while this potential is evident, the data collection phase found that intermediate outcomes from innovative work were currently not clearly contributing to higher-level outcomes in this way. Critically, the external factors (assumptions) that condition whether intermediate

outcomes lead to higher-level outcomes were largely absent. The evaluation was therefore unable to validate the right side of the theory of change.

Specifically, it appeared that learning and evidence from innovative work was not being used to inform wider UN Women strategies and programming; that UN Women was currently not a visible and influential actor in the area of innovation for gender equality and women's empowerment; and that there was limited interest and commitment from other stakeholders to support gender-responsive innovation. As a result, even where innovative initiatives produce concrete outputs and positive outcomes, assumptions within the TOC that this would contribute to wider strategies, results or impact at the organizational level were not clear. An explicitly articulated, operationalized and monitored TOC on innovation could help strengthen the connection between intermediate outcomes, higher outcomes and impact.





Photo © UN Women Americas and the Caribbean

# 4 FINDINGS

## FINDINGS

## 4.1 How does UN Women define innovation?

## FINDING 1:

**There is no clear and widely shared definition of innovation within UN Women.**

There is no clear or widely shared definition of innovation within the organization, nor is there a common vision of how innovation should be integrated into UN Women's work. An innovation strategy was developed in 2017, which defines innovation as "identifying new and more effective solutions that explicitly meet the needs of women and girls and have the ability to accelerate impact." However, this definition and strategy is not well known among personnel and mostly does not inform work on innovation at the regional or country levels. In the survey conducted to regional offices, country offices and headquarters units for this evaluation, 68 per cent of offices and units<sup>22</sup> reported that they are not aware of this organization-wide definition of innovation, while just 32 per cent were aware of it.

It appears that while ownership of this definition and strategy was situated with the Innovation Facility, established under the Programme division (2014-2016) and then placed under the leadership of UN Women's then Deputy Executive Director of Programme and Policy, it was never fully institutionalized across the entire organization. The fact that responsibility and expertise on innovation was concentrated in this way, combined with limited leadership more widely across the organization focusing specifically on innovation, contributed to the lack of institutionalization of this definition and strategy. In addition, momentum in this area was lost in recent years as a result of personnel turnover. The Special Assistant to the Deputy Executive Director at that time was tasked to oversee the Innovation facility with a team of two UN Women personnel. Later in 2018, it was announced that the Innovation facility would transition to coordinated actions across the organization assuming leadership for different initiatives.<sup>23</sup> This arrangement was set up until June 2018 when a new advisor of Innovation was set to join UN Women. In the interim, this position was filled by a secondment from a member state until June 2020. At the moment, the unit is left with a vacuum in leadership internal to UN Women, with funds available from previous years. External stakeholders interviewed also reported that they were not aware of any clear definition of innovation or a coherent approach to UN Women's work in this area.

The definitions that are frequently used by personnel to inform their work on innovation are varied and inconsistent, although some common patterns exist. Most notably, across the whole organization there is a strong conflation of innovation with technology and a tendency to see the application of technological tools and solutions as innovative, regardless of whether or not they offer something new. For example, many personnel describe using social media for communication or developing online activities as innovative, even though these are now quite standard activities. Meanwhile, non-technological solutions tend to be defined as innovative when they use specific theories or approaches that are new to UN Women (positive deviance, behavioural insights, human-centred design, etc.). For example, projects on childcare in Uruguay and domestic violence in Georgia were described as innovative because they used behavioural insights approaches to address the norms and behaviours that undermine the effectiveness of formal gender equality policies and structures.

A particularly common definition of innovation mentioned by personnel was applying established methods in a new context or to address a new problem. For example, a number of personnel working on the Buy from Women (BFW) platform reported that this initiative is innovative because it brings e-commerce and e-learning tools to developing-country contexts where these did not previously exist, and because it uses these technologies specifically to address women's economic empowerment and advance gender equality. Likewise, some of the personnel working on social innovation projects reported that these projects were innovative because they adopted approaches that had not previously been used by UN Women. This is a very broad definition that could in some cases allow quite standard approaches to be labelled as innovative in some contexts.

Beyond the emphasis on technology, new theories and approaches, or the application of existing methods in new contexts, the term "innovation" is used very loosely to describe a disparate set of activities, approaches or results. Some personnel pointed out that this lack of clarity not only results in an unfocused approach that reduces potential for impact, but also risks diluting UN Women's brand.

<sup>22</sup> The survey was sent to each country office, regional office and headquarters unit (1 survey per unit to collect an aggregated response from unit personnel).

<sup>23</sup> These initiatives included: the coordination of the Global Coalition for Change in innovation; the Innovative financing, the digital solutions (Buy from Women Platform), Frontier Technology (Blockchain) and Big Data.

The personnel that were interviewed and surveyed offered extremely diverse definitions of innovation, including using intersectional approaches, working with new or marginalized groups, working with more diverse partners, supporting female innovators, doing more with fewer resources, or generating transformative results.

The absence of a clear definition, vision or strategy for innovation across UN Women has resulted in a piecemeal approach in which the extent and nature of innovative work is dependent on the interests of individual personnel, the identification and labelling of innovative initiatives is highly inconsistent, and there is no standard framework for monitoring or reporting on innovative work. Disconnected pockets of innovative thinking and action exist within the organization, but these are not informed by a wider strategy, nor are there standardized mechanisms to facilitate sharing and learning between them. As a result, there is little possibility to build up a clear and coherent body of work on innovation or demonstrate UN Women's value added in this area.

This problem is widely recognized among personnel, and there is strong demand for a clear definition that can inform work on innovation across the organization. The Sub-Team on Innovation and Technology for the development of the next Strategic Plan is currently working on developing such a definition.<sup>24</sup> It is important that the definition that is ultimately adopted is clearly relevant to

the organization's mandate and goals and part of a wider vision that articulates the rationale, strategy and focus for UN Women's engagement on innovation.

Learning from this evaluation suggests that what would be most useful is a definition that has both a process and output element. Specifically, personnel would like to see a definition that includes:

- Innovation as **experimental ways of working** that question existing assumptions about how change happens and trial new ways of supporting change. Such experimental work involves taking risks, allowing space for failure, rapid feedback loops to enable ongoing learning to inform action, and a strong focus on documentation and knowledge generation.<sup>25</sup>
- Innovation as **new strategies and tools** to address challenging gender equality problems where traditional solutions are not delivering. While many personnel suggested that this could include applying existing strategies and tools to new contexts or new problems, others stressed that this must be understood as something genuinely new and not UN Women simply replicating existing strategies in its programming and labelling this as innovation.

### BOX 1: Innovation in the UN

The Secretary-General has called innovation “doing different things and doing things differently” in responding to the ever-changing array of challenges that the United Nations seeks to address. However, while innovation is regularly discussed across UN agencies, many agencies do not have a known or readily available definition. Below is a selection of definitions offered by various agencies.

- Through their Office of Innovation, UNICEF defines innovation as “**doing new things to solve problems and improve the lives of children around the world.**”
- WFP utilises the Innovation Accelerator, to create “**bold new tools and approaches across its global operations**” to achieve SDG 2: achieving zero hunger and eradicating malnutrition by 2030.
- UNDP's Innovation Facility was established to identify “**more effective solutions that add value for the people affected by development challenges**”.
- IFAD defines innovation as “**a process that adds value or solves a problem in new ways.** If possible, the product, idea or approach should also be new to its context, useful and cost-effective in relation to a goal, and able to “stick” after pilot testing”.
- For UNFPA, innovation means “**inclusively creating and scaling-up data-driven, sustainable and open solutions that accelerate the achievement of transformative results in the lives of women, adolescents and youth**”.
- UNHCR discusses innovation as “**the way in which individuals or organisations solve problems and create change by introducing new solutions to existing problems**”.
- UNCDF directs their Financial Innovation Lab (FinLab) “**to find and support solutions that help to promote inclusive and connected digital economies**” and “catalyzing digital innovation for financial inclusion”.

Source: Created by the evaluation team

<sup>24</sup> While the role of this sub-team is important it cannot fill the need for senior level leadership in this area. The need for such leadership was recognized in previous efforts to recruit a Chief of Innovation and Technology, although this recruitment was not successful.

<sup>25</sup> These innovative ways of working mentioned by UN Women personnel reflect adaptive and experimental approaches that are being increasingly used to address complex development problems. For example, adaptive management approaches ([https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/dn\\_-\\_adaptive\\_management.pdf](https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/dn_-_adaptive_management.pdf)) or problem-driven iterative adaptation ([https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/files/bsc/files/pdiatoolkit\\_ver\\_1\\_oct\\_2018.pdf](https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/files/bsc/files/pdiatoolkit_ver_1_oct_2018.pdf)).



**FINDING 2:**


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**UN Women’s lack of a clear definition of innovation has significant repercussions on how activities are categorized. Without clear parameters on what is innovative, categorization is largely left up to the individual’s judgment and further complicated by limitations of the Entity’s management information system.**

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At present, the RMS allows users to categorize activities into two groups: “innovation” and “frontier issues”. There is no detailed guidance on how activities should be categorized, nor are there any subcategories, such as “mobile health”, “digital financial services” or “agricultural technology” to further group activities into similar clusters. Subcategories would be useful in achieving a more granular view of programmatic activities and providing a convenient overview of the organization’s strengths and experience. At present, UN Women’s categorization, or lack thereof, does not offer this kind of functionality.

Without clear criteria, tagging of activities is left to individual discretion. One example of this in the RMS is a single use of social media in a communications campaign being tagged as innovative. What makes this innovative is unclear, but it is likely that the individual who tagged it considered use of social media as innovative. Without a clear definition of innovation, or criteria to inform categorization, personnel have been left to base this categorization on their own individual judgment. This ad hoc approach has a significant impact on the organization’s ability to obtain accurate programme analytics to understand programming, inform future planning exercises and add to the internal organizational knowledge around innovation. Clear categorization would provide a more straightforward means to locate records and, consequently, improve the organization’s ability to easily share information.

Innovation is also about strategies and tools, such as social innovation, behavioural insights, human-centred design and systems thinking. While there is evidence that some innovative strategies and tools are being used within UN Women, there are no parameters for what can be considered an innovative strategy. Again, this results in individuals making judgments about what amounts to innovation.

The inception phase of this evaluation suggested four high-level categories that could be used to systematically classify different components of innovation:

- Digital and other technological innovations
- Social innovation
- Innovative partnerships
- Frontier technology<sup>26</sup>.

Regardless of whether these specific categories are used, there is a clear need to define categories, subcategories and criteria for categorization, with clear and detailed parameters for individuals who are entering programme data into the RMS. In addition, the criteria and process for categorization should be socialized throughout the organization, so that personnel are clear about both why they should categorize activities in a certain way, and how they should do this.

It is also important to note that categorizations evolve. What was innovative or ground-breaking five years ago may no longer be considered as such. One example of this is the EQUALS Global Partnership, a network of different entities working to close the digital gender divide. When EQUALS was established in 2015, broad partnerships involving a diverse set of public and private sector partners were regarded as innovative. However, in 2021, there are many such partnerships or networks of assorted partners, and it is unclear whether UN Women should still categorize this as innovative. It is also unclear whether EQUALS is considered innovation due to its focus on achieving equal access and use of digital technologies. In a similar vein, there is a tag in the RMS entitled “frontier technology”, but there is no guidance about when this term becomes redundant, and an activity should be recategorized.

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<sup>26</sup> Frontier technology is one of the four categories of ‘Innovation and Technology for Development’ specified on the [UN Women Intranet](#) (Digital Innovation, Frontier Technology, Innovative Partnerships, Non-tech Innovations). According to the Intranet, the ‘Frontier technology’ category includes projects related to blockchain technology, big data and virtual reality.

## FINDINGS

## 4.2 What is the value added of UN Women's normative and coordination work on innovation?

## FINDING 3:

**UN Women's normative and coordination work on innovation (in the area of technology) is limited and not widely recognized due to a lack of strategy and insufficient technical expertise. However, there is potential and desire for the organization to play a more central role in this area.**

UN Women is widely recognized for its unique and valuable role in normative and coordination work on gender equality and women's empowerment. However, the organization is not currently playing such a role in relation to normative and coordination work on gender and innovation, which is an area where it currently has limited visibility and influence. Despite this, the evaluation found that there is an opportunity and appetite among external stakeholders for UN Women to step up its normative and coordination work on gender and innovation by building on its existing strengths, expertise and credibility. Stakeholders interviewed<sup>27</sup> for this evaluation reported that UN Women's in-depth knowledge on gender equality can add significant value to conversations around gender and innovation; that the organization has potential to

drive action among peers in this area; and that it can play a role in influencing high-impact innovation actors to adopt a gender-responsive approach to innovation. By taking on this role, UN Women would offer unique value both within the United Nations system and among wider communities working on innovation.

Given the organization's limited resources and operational programming in innovation, a stronger focus on normative and coordination work on gender and innovation could be a crucial way for it to support impact at scale. It was reported that the organization could add significant value by building a body of knowledge, evidence and guidance that could be used to inform policymaking around gender and innovation, and which partners working on innovation could draw on to guide their work.

**BOX 2: Generation Equality Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality**

The Generation Equality Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality intends to bridge the gender gap in digital access and competencies by promoting gender-responsive creation, use and ownership of physical and digital technologies and processes of innovation.

By 2026, it wants to reduce by half the gender digital divide across generations by accelerating meaningful access to digital technologies and universal digital literacy. The coalition employs different tactics such as (i) improving accessibility of digital services and learning tools, (ii) advancing innovative financing for twenty-first century skills and (iii) addressing stereotypes.

As of 19 February 2021, 14 leaders have joined the Generation Equality Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality.

Member States	United Nations Agencies	Civil Society Organizations	Philanthropies	Youth-Led Organizations	Private Sector
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Armenia</li> <li>Chile</li> <li>Finland</li> <li>Rwanda</li> <li>Tunisia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UNICEF</li> <li>International Telecommunication Union (ITU)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A+ Alliance</li> <li>Global Fund for Women</li> <li>Social Builder</li> </ul>	The Rockefeller Foundation	Digital Grassroots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Koc</li> <li>Microsoft</li> <li>Salesforce</li> </ul>

The Generation Equality Action Coalitions were introduced in 2020. They are still relatively young initiatives and have been subject to the challenges and operational learning curves imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The multisectoral partnership that UN Women has facilitated demonstrates a collective interest and commitment to looking at innovation and technology through a gender lens and has the potential to bring about concrete results for women and girls.

Source: Compiled by the evaluation team

Given the driving role of the private sector in technological innovation, stakeholders stressed that UN Women should reflect on how best to engage with the private sector as part of its normative and coordination work on gender and innovation. UN Women's normative lens could significantly contribute to the design and dissemination of technological interventions by the private sector, ensuring that these are not gender blind or discriminatory. However, many interviewees expressed concern that the organization currently lacks the right competencies, policies and procedures to work with the private sector, especially with regards to innovation, and stressed that there is a need to develop these key capacities. They also reflected that effective engagement with the private sector on innovation requires an overarching strategy on gender, technology and innovation to guide such engagement; a thorough analysis of the risks, benefits and opportunities of such engagement for the organization; and the ability to demonstrate the value added of UN Women to private sector actors. Issues of partnership with the private sector are discussed in further detail under Finding 8.

One of the main ways in which UN Women has engaged in normative and coordination work on innovation so far is through the Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation and the EQUALS Global Partnership. The EQUALS Global Partnership is “a committed group of corporate leaders, governments, businesses, not-for-profit organizations, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations and community groups” that consists of over 100 partners working together to close the digital gender divide. UN Women plays an important role as one of EQUALS's founding members and co-leader of the leadership coalition. It is seen as a critical partner and provides credibility to the partnership and to all EQUALS stakeholders.

Evidence suggests that the power of EQUALS was to coordinate groups of people working on similar topic, offering a means to “connect the dots” especially around the key coalitions – access, leadership and skills. UN Women was called out for its ability and willingness to rally members around a common cause or issue within the network. This was seen and experienced as an innovation way to promote and encourage new ways of thinking and sharing with the EQUALS network.

UN Women was able to broker the Women's Empowerment Principles with the Global Systems for Mobiles Association (GSMA) an important achievement. UN Women is also seen as the best-suited entity to provide gender data to influence standards related to gender, technology and innovation.

Measuring the impact of UN Women's existing normative and coordination work is generally considered a challenge within the organization. This also applies to work in the area of innovation. Coordination work can take the form of encouraging partners to participate in forums or demonstrating the value of gender equality work. These efforts are critical in achieving larger group buy-in and successful outcomes in gender equality and innovation. Likewise, much of UN Women's normative work is focused on laying the groundwork for future action and progress. Resources are spent developing guidance or principles, taking part in working groups and highlighting gender issues, but the contribution of this work to eventual concrete outcomes, such as policy or legislation related to innovation and technology, is often difficult to identify and attribute. Interviewees routinely stated that they saw UN Women as a strong point of reference and drew on the organization's gender equality guidance when developing their own tools. However, when it came to launching a policy or a framework, UN Women was not commonly attributed for its input. Given the limitations of UN Women's resources, it is important to consistently understand how they are being used and to measure their efficacy. At the moment, there does not appear to be a robust process within UN Women to measure the impact of its normative and coordination efforts in the area of innovation.

### BOX 3. EQUALS Network

The partnership's work is centered around three key coalitions: access, skills and leadership, and one cross-cutting group - research. Presently, UN Women is a permanent member of EQUALS Global Partnership Steering Committee and co-leads the Leadership Coalition with ITC, which is designed to ‘concretely address challenges that women in the tech sector tend to face systemically’.

EQUALS hopes to strengthen the components that drive the gender information and communication technology ecosystem and achieve equal access and use of digital technologies by 2030.

Source: Created by the evaluation team



## FINDINGS

## 4.3 What is the nature of UN Women's innovative initiatives?

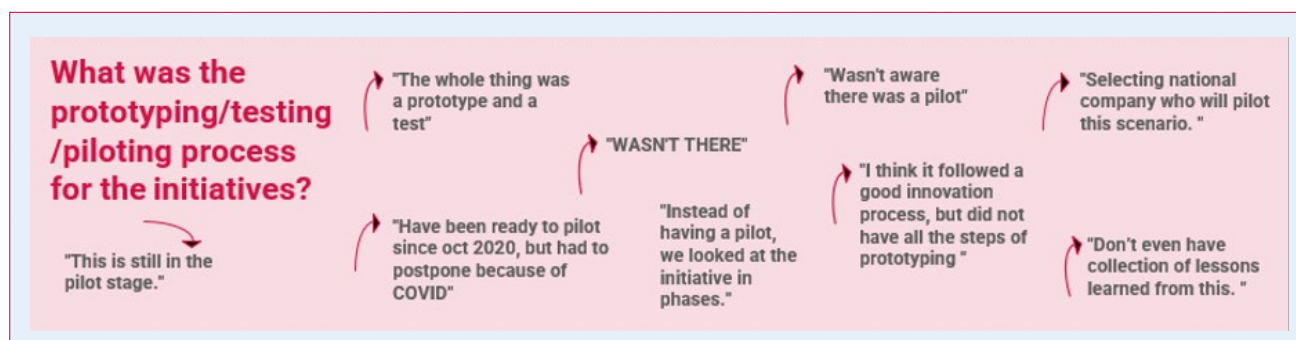
## FINDING 4:

**There is a lack of technical capacity in the organization to identify the potential roadblocks and challenges specific to the implementation of technology-based innovative initiatives. Without proper planning, several projects encountered challenges that could have been avoided through more comprehensive risk identification and mitigation measures.**

As many of UN Women's technology-based innovation initiatives involve applying existing and emerging technologies in new contexts or to address new problems, they inherently carry a variety of risks that arise as a result of the organization testing out new ways of working. While

the evidence shows that in most cases systematic needs assessments and problem-identification processes were undertaken prior to UN Women's social innovation initiatives, this was not always the case with UN Women's technology-based innovation initiatives.

**FIGURE 5. Excerpts from evaluation interview notes**



Source: Created by the evaluation team

Interviews with Country Office personnel involved in social innovation projects revealed that these initiatives all began with a recognition that the existing structures and strategies to address a given gender equality problem were not producing the desired results. With this recognition as a starting point, Country Offices and their partners examined why existing responses were not working, in some cases commissioning research to understand this. They then identified social innovation approaches as a new solution that could potentially help overcome the norms-related challenges that undermine the effectiveness of existing solutions to address violence against women and girls.

Alternatively, evidence from this evaluation suggested that UN Women's technology-based interventions originated with the desire to utilize a certain type of technology perceived as innovative without necessarily considering whether or not it was the most suitable or sustainable method for addressing the needs of women and girls.

Interviews with key informants involved in the planning and design of the BFW digital platform highlighted that the initiative originated as a result of the desire of executive leadership to have a digital element to complement the Climate Smart Agriculture Flagship Programme Initiative to be rolled out in 2016. The BFW e-commerce platform was advanced by several individuals within the organization without a proper needs assessment or assessment of personnel capacity as it pertains to the development and operation of a digital platform. A number of Country Offices implementing BFW reported that there was insufficient technical expertise in the Country Office or headquarters to support the design process and identify potential challenges, yet they still felt expectation from leadership to implement the platform. As a result, the programme failed to adequately address several foreseeable issues.

#### BOX 4. *Buy From Women Platform*

Buy from Women (BFW) is a digital and mobile platform that aims to provide a one-stop shop for women smallholders and entrepreneurs. It was established by UN Women under its Global Flagship Programme on Climate Smart Agriculture with the aim of providing women farmers with easier access to and control over land and productive resources, access to information and skills, and access to markets and finance. In some countries such as Costa Rica and South Africa it is also being used for women entrepreneurs in other sectors. The first BFW country platform was Rwanda, which was initiated in 2016, while the other country platforms have all been initiated since 2018. All of the BFW platforms are still being developed or piloted and none have yet been transferred to the partners that will ultimately host them.

BFW is currently being implemented in 16 countries. The implementation status in each country is as follows:

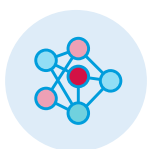
- **Pipeline and inception phase:** Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria, Togo (through UNDP)
- **Research and analysis phase:** Central African Republic, Niger
- **Design and development phase:** Costa Rica, Cote d'Ivoire, DR Congo, Liberia, Malawi, Senegal
- **Pilot test and consolidation phase:** Haiti, Mali, Rwanda, South Africa

Source: Created by the evaluation team

#### BOX 5. *Challenges and Limitations in Implementing the Buy from Women Platform*



Several Country Offices worked with English-speaking programme developers contracted by headquarters who did not **understand the local language and context**. Programme personnel in these Country Offices had to dedicate significant time to translate material. This has been mitigated in some countries by working with French speaking developers.



The BFW platform is difficult to scale, as in less developed countries it is unlikely that poor or marginalized women will be able to effectively use it because they lack **connectivity, electricity and literacy/digital literacy**.



Providing women with mobile devices to utilize the BFW platform raises serious questions about sustainability if these women are unable to pay ongoing **costs for Internet connectivity or to repair or replace devices** when they break.



Hosting or operating an e-commerce platform such as BFW generates serious operational, financial and legal **inherent risks for UN Women** in relation to the **collection of personal data**, involvement in financial transactions and provision of services by third-party contractors. Robust and attentive risk management strategies are thus needed.

Source: Created by the evaluation team

UN Women's work with Building Blocks/Cash for Work was initiated in a similar manner, led by the supply-driven desire to utilize blockchain technology to digitize the existing Cash for Work programme in the refugee camps situated in Jordan. The project was inspired by the WFP's reported success utilizing blockchain technology

as a technological infrastructure for the distribution of food and other resources to Syrian refugees in Jordan, as opposed to the result of a systematic problem-identification process by UN Women to determine whether this was the most appropriate method for providing cash to refugee women.

Interviews with key personnel involved in UN Women's work with blockchain at the country and headquarters levels revealed that in many cases, personnel were learning to understand the concept of blockchain as they were implementing the programme, with several reporting that they still did not have a clear understanding of the technology. While the Building Blocks programme had been reportedly successfully implemented by WFP to provide digital food vouchers to upwards of 100,000 refugees, blockchain remained less tested and proven as a technology to assist affected women and was adopted without the expertise to identify and address apparent risks, including:

- The ethical risks related to gathering and securely storing the sensitive biometric data of vulnerable refugee women.
  - The fact that the use of iris-scanning technology precludes the sight-disabled from benefitting from the programme. It is important to note that the project does have procedures in place in such cases where UN Women coordinates with the UNHCR protection unit to confirm eye disability and the appointment of a trusted beneficiary to receive the cash via a signed delegation.
  - The concern from partners that the “financial inclusion” offered by the use of blockchain technology was not inclusion in any regulated formal financial market, had limited protections and did not offer any entry point to formal financial services in the future. It is important to note that according to UN Women staff, blockchain does not aim for financial inclusion with regulated markets as the initiative is targeted to refugees whereas access to financial markets and services appears as a separate challenge.
- The need to translate English course material into the languages used at the regional coding camps;
  - Issues related to Internet access across the continent and how lack of access could possibly preclude girls from continuing their coding education upon returning home;
  - The appropriate budget to buy laptops that had been promised to all of the coding camp participants;
  - The need for underage participants to travel to the coding camps with a chaperone, which precluded some girls from participating.

In the case of the African Girls Can Code Initiative, the idea for the project originated with ITU, when the organization approached UN Women with a two-page proposal for the project. Evidence from the evaluation revealed that UN Women took the lead on crafting a problem statement and theory of change for the project with a limited needs assessment and limited technical expertise in designing innovative initiatives in this technical area. As a result, the inherent risks of implementing regional and national coding camps were not taken into account during the design phase. This is evidenced by the fact that the programme design failed to take into account:

While certain challenges related to innovative initiatives are unavoidable and difficult to anticipate, evidence indicates that weak risk assessment and mitigation processes for technology-based innovative initiatives during their design phase led to challenges in the problem identification phase. It also increased time and effort for personnel to adequately implement the initiatives.

#### BOX 6. Building Blocks/Blockchain

In 2016, WFP launched Building Blocks, a blockchain-based system that communicates with the overarching refugee registration database of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). WFP sought to make this technological infrastructure available to other United Nations agencies. In 2018 UN Women approached WFP suggesting they also utilize Building Blocks to digitize the existing Cash for Work programmes in the Zaatari and Al-Azraq refugee camps in Northern Jordan. Through the Building Blocks programme, a Cash for Work participant can shop at one of the designated supermarkets within the camp by using iris-scanning technology to make a cash withdrawal request. This data is communicated to UNHCR's registration database, which confirms the participant's identity and automatically sends the cash to the Building Blocks blockchain. The transaction is verified through the common blockchain network of UN Women and WFP. This system is designed to improve security and accountability and reduce cost and risk around cash disbursement for UN Women.

The program was tested with 20 women, launched with 200 women (100 in each camp) and has now increased to 400 women\* in total – the number that UN Women considers to be scale. While the initiative directly impacts just 400 women, UN Women considers the impact in more holistic terms where blockchain is not the core component, but part of a program which includes protection services for GBV survivors, support for low literacy women and discussions with men and boys around gender roles. The Jordan Country Office estimates that both directly and indirectly, the program has reached around 13,000 people.

\* After the evaluation was completed, it was reported that the UN Women's refugee camp-based Oases direct cash assistance programme transitioned to the blockchain modality reaching up to 1200 women by 2021.



## FINDINGS

## 4.4 What are the outcomes of UN Women's innovation work?

## FINDING 5:

### Scaling up innovative work has been challenging, but potential is greatest where UN Women contributes to the development of innovative approaches that can be scaled up by others.

Scaling up has been a significant challenge for innovative initiatives. This is despite the fact that personnel report that impact at scale is an expected outcome from innovation.

In the case of BFW, all of the country platforms remain in the pilot or design phase, despite this initiative having been launched in 2016. In some BFW countries, work has stalled because of operational challenges, lack of capacity, or a lack of interest among incoming leadership at Country Office level. More broadly, however, personnel report that BFW has focused heavily on the design and development of the technology but has not dedicated enough attention and resources to developing a viable business model or strategies for roll-out, scaling up and sustainability. In particular, there has been insufficient investment in marketing strategies to publicize the initiative and attract platform users. In addition, lessons generated in different BFW countries have not been adequately captured and shared, resulting in the same challenges and delays being experienced across different countries (although there has recently been more systematic lesson sharing among BFW countries).

For example, the use of English language platform designers for non-English speaking countries, or delays in putting in place sufficient technical expertise in country offices.

Ultimately, for BFW to go to scale it must be accessible and demonstrably useful to women farmers/entrepreneurs, as well as to their potential customers, in order to attract these stakeholders to the platform. There are serious questions about whether enough women and customers will engage to make this a viable and sustainable initiative. At the moment all the BFW country platforms are still in design, testing or consolidation phase and it is not possible to make online purchases through these platforms. It is not clear how many women have utilized the platform and in what ways so far, or if it has yet connected any women with potential customers for offline transactions.

#### BOX 7 . Social Innovation: From defining the problem to scaling up

A number of innovative initiatives stand out as having followed a clear process of identifying a problem where existing solutions are not working; investigating the problem and designing a new solution; testing and piloting the new solution; and embedding this solution within wider processes in order to scale up.

This is particularly the case with the social innovation initiatives, which have invested in problem definition and learning at the outset, and have identified opportunities and partnerships for scale. While the reasons for this are not clear, it may be because the social innovation work is closer to the 'traditional' work of UN Women, so knowledge about the problem and potential solutions has been greater and partnerships easier to build from the start. Or because the small budgets of these social innovation initiatives mean that they have focused on catalytic research and design work, and have clearly required others to support scaling up. Examples include the behavioral insights work in Uruguay and Georgia and the work on positive deviance in Moldova below.

- UN Women's work on positive deviance in Moldova began with the observation that, while reporting of violence by women remains stubbornly low despite investment in this area, some women do report abuse and manage to escape the cycle of violence. User journey mapping was undertaken to understand the factors that enable such positive deviance cases and found that factors such as community and peer support were critical. Drawing on this learning, UN Women has supported women survivors to provide peer support and advocacy, and is supporting the establishment of survivors' networks.

Source: Created by the evaluation team

For the Building Blocks initiative, there has been confusion among the partners about the envisioned scale of the programme. The programme was tested with 20 women beneficiaries, launched with 200 women (100 in two camps) and has now increased to 400 women in total<sup>28</sup>. While the initiative directly impacts just 400 women, UN Women considers the impact in more holistic terms, where blockchain is not the core component, but part of a program which includes protection services for GBV survivors, support for low literacy women and discussions with men and boys around gender roles. This broadened view of impact also includes the CFW workers' families, and networks who benefit indirectly from Block Chain/ C4W. The Jordan Country office estimates that both directly and indirectly, the program has reached around 13,000 people. However, other partners viewed this work with 400 women as a pilot project and had anticipated that the initiative would come closer to the scale that WFP serves, which is upwards of 100,000 beneficiaries. This miscommunication has caused frustration among some partners and also raises questions about how UN Women personnel define scale and impact.

A number of personnel at Country Office and headquarters level commented that, as a small agency with limited funds, UN Women is not placed to take innovative programmes to scale and needs to be realistic about the role it can play. Based on the initiatives examined by this evaluation, it appears that scaling up innovative work is most likely to be achieved where:

- **UN Women undertakes a small innovative research and pilot project, the findings from which will inform larger programmes or government actions.**

In Uruguay, UN Women raised a limited amount of funds (approximately US\$45,000) to research, design and test behaviourally informed text messages to encourage men to take parental leave. The pilot programme and subsequent full roll-out of these text messages will be undertaken by the Banco de Previsión Social (BPS), which is the State entity that provides subsidies for parental leave and informs parents about their rights to that leave. This will create significant scale, as ultimately these messages will be sent to all men eligible for parental leave. BPS has been involved in the project from the problem identification phase and therefore has the ownership and desire to take on and scale up this approach, as well as potentially to integrate behavioural insights into other aspects of its communication if this initiative proves successful.

A similar approach can be seen in the behavioural insights work to encourage teachers to report domestic violence in Georgia<sup>29</sup>. It was developed from a recognition that existing training and reporting mechanisms were not resulting in more teachers reporting suspected domestic violence cases. In this case, UN Women undertook a relatively small behavioural insights survey and pilot project for teachers to report domestic violence. The findings from these activities will be used to inform a much larger project, Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in Georgia, which will be funded by the European Union. This project will work with various Government ministries and allow UN Women's initial innovative research and piloting work to inform responses on a greater scale.

- **UN Women develops an innovative model that is adopted and replicated by others.**

AGCCI developed a model of coding camps for girls that has been taken up, adapted and implemented in different ways by both the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and UNESCO. Other partners have also adopted some elements of the camp in their programming. While UN Women intends to scale up the initiative after addressing some of the challenges from the first phase, it appears that the greatest scale and impact may come from developing a model that others will carry forward.

- **UN Women's innovative initiative is integrated with government systems and aligned with government priorities.**

One example is the Costa Rica BFW platform, which is being developed by UN Women but will be hosted from the outset by the national trust fund of the National Social Development Institute/IMAS (FIDEIMAS) and integrated with FIDEIMAS services, as well as with the national bank and postal services. The national institution that oversees FIDEIMAS (Instituto Mixto de Ayuda Social) views BFW as a priority given the market access barriers that women entrepreneurs are experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This buy-in from national institutions and integration with national institutions and systems creates potential for BFW to create sustainable opportunities for women at scale. Similarly, in South Africa, it is anticipated that the database of BFW providers will be hosted by the Government and used for government procurement, again creating potential for scale and sustainability.

<sup>28</sup> After the evaluation was completed, it was reported that the UN Women's refugee camp-based Oases direct cash assistance programme transitioned to the blockchain modality reaching up to 1200 women by 2021.

<sup>29</sup> UN Women's EVAW work in Georgia was included as an example of behavioural insights approaches in the 2021 United Nations Behavioural Science Report. [https://www.uninnovation.network/assets/BeSci/UN\\_Behavioural\\_Science\\_Report\\_2021.pdf](https://www.uninnovation.network/assets/BeSci/UN_Behavioural_Science_Report_2021.pdf)

**FINDING 6:**

**UN Women is trialling alternative solutions to gender equality problems, although some of these solutions are not genuinely “new”. However, there is no systematic organizational learning from these trials, and they are not contributing to evidence-based programming.**

Innovative work in UN Women has involved recognizing that some traditional solutions are not working and trialling alternative solutions, as well as developing new solutions to respond to emerging problems. These solutions have focused particularly on empowerment, social norm change and harnessing digital tools.

AGCCI trialled an alternative solution – coding camps – in order to address the growing problem of a digital divide in Africa. It also helped participating girls identify possible solutions to problems in their communities using the digital skills they had learned. It is hoped that later phases of the project will involve supporting some of these girls to bring these ideas to market. Personnel involved with the initiative reported that the project took a new approach to engaging with and empowering girls, one that was significantly different from UN Women’s usual work on empowerment.” While it was reported that the alternative approach trialled by the initiative provided skills transfer and built girls’ confidence, there is no evidence as yet that it resulted in longer term empowerment and opportunities.

Through its social innovation initiatives UN Women is trialling a number of alternative solutions to address the social norms that undermine gender equality. These initiatives focus on problems where traditional solutions, such as policies, reporting systems, information provision or training, are not producing the desired results and aim to address underlying barriers to progress.

#### **BOX 8. The African Girls Can Code Initiative**

AGCCI 2018-2022 is an Africa-wide initiative developed and implemented by UN Women in partnership with ITU and the African Union Commission. It aims to empower young girls by teaching them coding, digital literacy and personal development while building confidence and leadership abilities. The initiative attempts to bridge the gender digital divide by providing opportunities for girls to engage in a variety of classes and workshops in which they are exposed to modern technology and introduced to pathways to careers in STEM and information and communications technology.

The programme was intended to cover the entire African continent by holding 15 coding camps across Africa and directly involving more than 1,000 girls. By the time of the mid-term evaluation of the initiative, 32 African Union Member States had participated in the 5 coding camps held in Ethiopia and South Africa involving only 567 girls.

Source: Created by the evaluation team

These alternative solutions include SMS messaging that addresses the beliefs and norms that prevent men from taking their parental leave in Uruguay, or interventions that address the hierarchical culture and weak coordination and information provision that prevent teachers from using existing systems to report domestic violence. A key element of these initiatives has been an initial analysis of why existing solutions are not effective.

The Building Blocks initiative also trialled an alternative solution by using blockchain technology to create a digital wallet, with the aim of enhancing refugee women’s financial control and autonomy and enabling them to save money, thereby also increasing overall household resilience. While it was generally agreed that the use of blockchain technology in this context was undoubtedly a new solution – as this has not been done before – interviewees involved with the project questioned whether blockchain technology was actually needed or whether another technology or approach would have achieved the same or even better or more cost-effective results.

There are questions over the extent to which the innovative solutions being trialled by UN Women are genuine innovation. While the technologies or approaches are new to UN Women, in some cases they are already being used by others, or elsewhere, to address gender equality issues.

Stakeholders involved in AGCCI agreed that the initiative is innovative in the context of Africa, although not necessarily an entirely new approach. However, it is also important to note that the two main intervention strategies of the initiative are capacity-building and advocacy, which are standard mechanisms through which UN Women seeks to advance gender equality, although in this case the delivery format was new for UN Women. BFW is an e-commerce and e-learning platform with a gender focus targeting the needs of underserved women smallholders and women-led coops and MSMEs, but personnel working on the initiative disagreed about whether this makes it innovative or simply an adaptation of existing e-commerce and e-learning tools. Likewise, personnel working on social innovation approaches such as behavioural insights and positive deviance recognized that these approaches are already being used to advance gender equality goals in other contexts and by other actors. Meanwhile, a personnel involved in Building Blocks stated, “There is nothing innovative about blockchain at this phase. We are only piggy-backing on other contracts that other agencies have. We are also not doing anything unique. We are doing what UNHCR and WFP have been doing for years.”



A major challenge for UN Women is that such trialling of alternative solutions is taking place in sometimes ad hoc and disconnected ways, driven by the interests of specific Regional or Country Offices and lacking a rigorous approach to capturing and disseminating lessons. Sharing and learning about innovative work sometimes takes place at programme level (e.g. among Country Offices implementing BFW) or at regional level (such as facilitated by the Europe and Central Asia Regional Office). However, there is no organization-wide systematic approach to identify, track, document and learn about these new solutions, nor is there guidance or frameworks on how to monitor and report on results from innovation.

As a result, UN Women is not using these initiatives to develop a body of knowledge about what works that can be used to inform decisions about which solutions the organization should invest in, or which solutions it should advocate for others to adopt. The absence of such systematic and rigorous learning from innovation is a key reason why innovative work is not demonstrably contributing to the higher-level outcome of evidence-based programming, as was envisaged in the reconstructed theory of change.

## FINDING 7:

### The extent to which UN Women’s innovative initiatives reach marginalized women is mixed, with digital innovation presenting particular barriers to access.

“Increased outreach to diverse or left-behind groups” was most commonly cited as an outcome of innovation in the survey of UN Women personnel. However, a deeper dive into UN Women’s innovative initiatives reveals that the extent to which innovation has increased outreach and impact for women who are marginalized or left behind is actually very mixed.

AGCCI clearly reached marginalized girls from rural areas of Ethiopia and South Africa who had not previously had access to any technology. The initiative focused on girls from public schools where there is no access to information technology education.

The social innovation initiatives focused on ending violence against women in Georgia and Moldova also appear to have the potential to reach the most marginalized women. In Georgia, domestic violence and problems of underreporting are greatest in rural areas and among ethnic minority communities, so the planned rolling out of the behavioural insights approach to these communities should have an impact on marginalized women. In Moldova, the creation of local-level domestic violence survivors’ networks should help reach marginalized women, while the virtual reality project on sexual harassment will engage with young people in rural areas. Moreover, co-creation processes that draw on the expertise of affected populations have been central to the design of some of the social innovation initiatives, such as the innovative EAW projects in Moldova, allowing the perspective of different categories of stakeholders – including marginalized groups – to inform design.

However, there was no evidence that the other innovative initiatives studied for this evaluation would increase outreach to marginalized women including those with disabilities. In the Uruguay childcare project, it is men with

jobs in the formal private sector that have access to these parental leave benefits, so the project will not impact families that may have more marginalized or insecure employment. The Building Blocks initiative worked with a marginalized population of refugee women, but these women were already engaged in the wider Cash for Work programme, so the use of innovation did not increase outreach. Blockchain did allow UN Women to reach women during the COVID pandemic where cash disbursements were affected for most humanitarian actors due to restrictions.

There is a tension between using digital tools and reaching the most marginalized women, who face multiple barriers to accessing these tools. This was explained indicating that currently innovation is seen through technology, and because we are limited to that perception, we have not been able to reach [marginalized] groups. Because by definition they don’t have the ability to connect to our platforms. Being aware of this tension from the outset and addressing it in design phase is critical to avoid digital initiatives excluding the most marginalized women.

BFW is a clear example of this tension. Personnel involved in the programme admitted that in less developed BFW countries it is extremely unlikely that poor or marginalized women will be able to use the platform because they lack Internet connectivity, electricity, literacy and digital literacy. For example, BFW personnel in Malawi reported that smart phone penetration in the country is just 14 per cent, with women a minority of this group. In contrast, in the BFW team in Costa Rica conducted a survey that found that most women have a smartphone and on average spend around US\$20 per month on smartphone usage, meaning that connectivity will not be a barrier to more marginalized women engaging with the Costa Rica platform.

In AGCCI, although marginalized girls were the main beneficiary, the design of the initiative did not take into account that most of the girls who received training would not have access to the Internet once they returned home.

External actors commenting on the Building Blocks initiative raised concerns about whether the use of iris biometrics technology would potentially exclude some disabled women, such as those with eye trauma or cataracts. More generally, they pointed out that the value of using technology to reach out to the most marginalized women is limited because of the need for personal engagement to understand and respond to these women's specific circumstances and avoid putting them at further risk.

Country Office personnel recognize the barriers that marginalized women face in accessing digital initiatives, and efforts have been made within some initiatives to overcome these barriers. In Malawi, BFW is using unstructured supplementary service data (USSD) technology so that women can access some elements of the platform

from basic (non-smart) mobile phones. In Liberia, BFW is working through women's cooperatives in recognition that individual women farmers will not be able to access the platform. Similarly, approaches were used in Haiti, Mali, Senegal and Cote-d'Ivoire.

Some of the approaches adopted by Country Offices to include marginalized women in digital initiatives do not appear to be realistic or sustainable. For example, the Senegal BFW programme plans to provide devices to women as part of the pilot phase, although it seems unlikely that these women will be able to pay ongoing costs for Internet connectivity or repair or replace devices when they break. Likewise, the girls who participated in AGCCI were given a laptop with pre-loaded software to take home after completing the camp, but their ability to use this will be severely limited by lack of Internet access in their communities, the cost of connectivity and the inability to repair or replace broken laptops.

## FINDING 8:

### Work on innovation has potential to engage more diverse partners, particularly from the private sector at country level, but UN Women lacks capacity to fully develop these partnerships at organization-wide level.

Innovative work provides an opportunity to engage with more diverse partners, in particular the private sector. It also provides an opportunity to engage in new areas or approaches with more traditional partners. UN Women personnel and leadership recognize that partnership with the private sector can offer new ideas, approaches, expertise, tools and resources for innovation. However, a number of headquarters personnel suggested that UN Women lacks the capacity to build effective partnerships with the private sector on an organization-wide basis. They stressed that this requires a long time and a significant investment in building relationships and trust, as well as caution over the potential for reputational risk.

The evaluation found evidence of successful private sector partnerships at country level. For example, there has been significant focus on partnership with the private sector in BFW countries. In the South Africa Multi-Country Office, there was a strong push from management to involve different partners, and the office has mobilized resources from the private sector and established partnerships with Facebook and the mobile communications company Vodacom. In Liberia, the mobile communications company Orange is the main partner for the BFW platform, while funding comes from global-level funds

provided to UN Women from the Alibaba Foundation. It is hoped that Orange will ultimately host the platform. In Haiti, a partnership was established with a social enterprise that produces chocolate and buys cocoa from women producers, called Ayitika, although the BFW work there has stalled. At regional level, the UN Women West and Central Africa Regional Office is reaching out to banks, financial technology companies and mobile operators to explore collaboration around the BFW platform. In addition, a number of BFW programmes involve partnership with more traditional partners, such as other United Nations agencies and governments.

The evaluation also found evidence of innovative work with other types of new partners, such as intergovernmental or United Nations entities. AGCCI involved a partnership with the African Union Commission and the ITU, both of which are not usual UN Women partners. However, the programme has not managed to achieve the private sector engagement it had wanted. Building Blocks worked with WFP, UNHCR, a local supermarket chain and a biometrics partner, however these relationships were largely brokered by WFP, and have limited in scale, reaching around 400 women<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> After the evaluation was completed, it was reported that the UN Women's refugee camp-based Oases direct cash assistance programme transitioned to the blockchain modality reaching up to 1200 women by 2021.

**FINDING 9:****Innovation can enable UN Women to reach a greater number of people and have more impact with its limited resources.**

The development of digital initiatives can potentially enable UN Women to reach more people while using fewer resources. This was observed by a number of Country Offices during the COVID-19 pandemic, when much of UN Women's activity moved online. However, in order to do more with less through digital engagement it is critical to ensure meaningful access, uptake and effectiveness of such activities.

The South Africa Multi-Country Office reported that since many of its programme activities moved online as a result of COVID-19 it has been able to reach a much greater number of women for a lower cost than it would have with traditional programming. Personnel gave the example of a gender-based violence application that can engage large numbers of students for a relatively small investment.

The cost of developing BFW country platforms was on average around US\$50,000 per platform, while the platform has potential to deliver multiple functions - including training, access to markets and financial services, mapping and monitoring resources and stock - for large numbers of women. BFW personnel in Liberia pointed out that addressing barriers to women's market access through digital technology is far less expensive than addressing them through traditional solutions such as infrastructure provision. BFW therefore appears to have potential to do more with less money, but this potential can only be realized if pilot projects are taken to scale, and if there is meaningful access to and appetite for the platform from women entrepreneurs and their customers. However, it is worth noting that BFW has been human resource intensive, with personnel of the West and Central Africa Regional Office

stressing that because it is innovative and a new area of work for UN Women it required more skilled personnel at both HQ and country level to get it up and running than a traditional project. The actual cost including human resources is therefore much higher.

Overall, evidence from this evaluation suggests that using innovation to identify new solutions, and influencing others to take these solutions to scale, is the most effective investment of UN Women's limited resources. For example, personnel involved with innovation work in the Europe and Central Asia Regional Office stressed that UN Women should seek to be catalytic by creating solutions in partnership with others, which can then be taken on and upscaled by others. This perspective was echoed by many personnel from different parts of the organization, who recognized that, as UN Women's limited resources are not sufficient to take innovative initiatives to significant scale, there must be a strong focus on influencing others to scale up innovation for gender equality. This can be challenging given the limited specific policies, procedures and guidances<sup>31</sup> in UN Women for co-creating with the private sector.

This catalytic approach to innovation can be seen in both the Uruguay and Georgia social innovation initiatives. In both cases, a small amount of funding for research and piloting work has led to innovative approaches being taken up by larger actors, with potential to generate a significant impact from this small initial investment. BFW Costa Rica also represents a limited investment by UN Women in platform design and development that will be taken on and expanded by a strong national-level institution.

<sup>31</sup> In finalizing this evaluation, the team was made aware of a recent promulgation of a Private Sector Collaboration Guidance issued on 30 June 2021. |

## FINDINGS

## 4.5 Organizational efficiency: Are UN Women's systems, structures and culture suitable for supporting innovation?

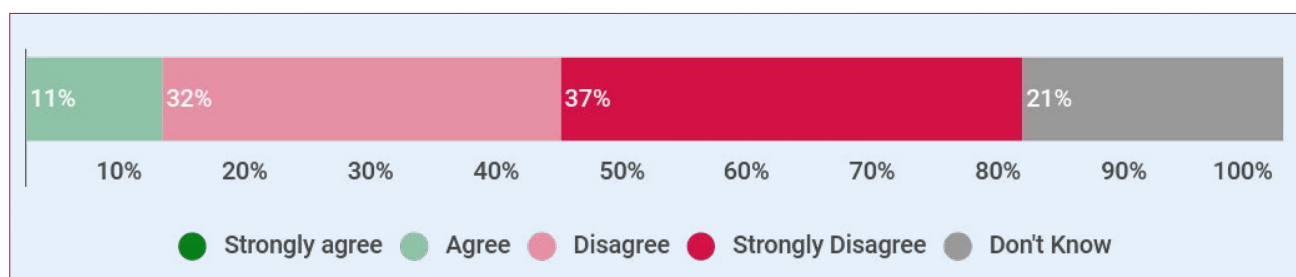
## FINDING 10:

## Supportive systems and structures are not in place to enable innovation in UN Women.

Case studies, interviews, survey results and documentation analysed provided evidence that UN Women still has not enabled systems nor developed adequate structures to support innovation as a transformative and systematic approach for gender equality. Case studies have showcased pockets of innovative thinking and application of new technologies to bring solutions to gender equality and women's empowerment, but these are not embedded in an organizational framework that could provide the necessary support to deliver on the Entity's innovation related vision. The survey to regional offices, country offices and headquarters units identified slow and restrictive organizational processes, insufficient financial resources, insufficient partnerships, lack of technical capacity, lack of support from management and lack of knowledge-sharing platforms as the main constraints for innovation. The lack of frameworks to engage in partnerships for innovation was also pointed out as a recurrent constraint.

Systems, understood as the processes supporting the flow of information, knowledge and resources that support innovation work in UN Women, do not provide substantial backing to advance innovation. UN Women's financial systems were not able to provide clear information on budgets and expenditure specifically on innovation primarily because projects are tagged as innovation with no clear and systematic definition. Without a clear and widely known strategy and definition of technological and social innovation, internal systems cannot respond effectively to the demands of the organization in this area. Survey results from country offices, regional offices and headquarters units clearly indicate that UN Women's internal processes and procedures do not enable innovation. Open ended responses indicated that some of the most significant constraints to innovation work included lengthy bureaucratic procurement, operations and financial processes, old-fashioned and conservative programming approaches, risk-averse business culture and lack of technical capacity to implement innovative initiatives.

**FIGURE 6. Survey responses: Adequacy of UN Women's internal processes and procedures to support innovation**



Source: Evaluation Survey of UN Women Headquarters Units, Regional Offices, Country Offices.

All case studies showcased evidence of insufficient opportunities for lesson sharing among countries and between regions and for reflection on what works and what needs to change. The flow of information around social and technological innovation is hampered by the lack of an overall structure for this area that would include clear policy and framework guidance. For example, with the BFW initiative, personnel reported that it would be useful to have information about how the programme has worked in other countries and suggested that there needs to be much stronger documentation, as well as more facilitation of experience sharing among countries by headquarters.

Similarly, AGCCI was not anchored in any organizational strategy that could have linked Regional Offices and Country Offices for major impact. Some personnel reflected that lessons have not been learned nor adapted in response to evidence about what is not working, in particular to be honest about the fact that BFW has been "trying to do the same thing for five years with very little progress." Personnel reported that UN Women lacks the reflectiveness and agility to accept that the existing approach is not working and to change it mostly due to limited accountability frameworks.



More broadly related to innovation processes in UN Women, several interviewees spoke of innovative initiatives not being open to all, but dependent on a few key individuals who were able to take action, limiting the ability of internal systems to allow equal flow of information. External interviewees also discussed a perception that successful innovation work depended on a person's individual agency within the organization, rather than on a system that enabled anyone to participate and suggest innovative approaches. There are also concerns that, in some cases, overly ambitious or unrealistic innovation initiatives are designed and launched by certain personnel, who then move on leaving others to manage implementation, and are not accountable for the projects that they have initiated.

Similarly, there are no corporate systems to measure or report on innovation, which limits the ability of the organization to understand what is working and what it is not.

Structures understood as the institutional architecture - governance and configuration of personnel and units in UN Women - are not in place to optimally support social and technological innovation. There are pockets of working arrangements, such as in the Arab States Regional Office and the Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, where innovation work is being coordinated well with dedicated personnel in charge of innovation. For example, in the Arab States Regional Office, the innovation and advocacy specialist is housed under the Partnerships Unit to be able to work in a cross-cutting manner, supporting all programmatic areas and creating spaces for innovation across the Regional Office. Similarly, leadership in the Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office has been pushing forward staff to work in innovative ways. In WCARO, the BFW Knowledge Sharing webinar series, is an initiative for internal capacity building and sharing of lessons learned and best practices among UN Women personnel on innovative projects and approaches. However, this is not sufficient for establishing sustained practices of creating spaces for innovation and design thinking. Innovation labs seem to resonate across different Regional Offices, but the lack of human resources limits the ability to implement them. The Europe and Central Asia Regional Office was able to start Innovation Conversations and Innovation Bootcamps (the Ideas Campaign and the Innovation Labs for Gender Equality) with dedicated personnel and commitment from leadership. Both initiatives capitalise on UN Women's regional leadership as a knowledge broker on gender equality and women's empowerment whilst facilitating ideas exchange and a growth and development mindset. The Innovation Conversations were initiated in

2020 bi-monthly as a way to create a space to discuss new innovative ideas that can be applied in the context of UN Women. Each session provides a platform for stimulating discussions and debates across UN agencies, donors, partners, academia, private sector, public sector, third sector and civil society allowing a platform for debate and learning.

In terms of systems and processes, lack of tailored internal arrangements to support innovative initiatives have hampered quick and dynamic implementation, as evidenced in most of the case studies. This is also triangulated with the survey, where slow and restrictive organizational processes are ranked as most significant by a higher number of respondents. Almost all stakeholders indicated that current procurement processes are very challenging and not conducive to implement innovative initiatives or partner and implement initiatives that are seen as innovative. This is mostly explained by limited organizational direction and leadership to implement and guide procurement and legal frameworks that could support the implementation of innovative initiatives.

The BFW platform initiative showcased indications of rigid and lengthy approval, procurement and contracting processes that resulted in long delays to contract the expertise needed to take the programme forward as well as hindered collaboration with the private sector. Malawi personnel gave the example of having to go through a lengthy open tendering process to hire institutional consultants for the USSD development which slowed down implementation. Similarly, AGCCI was limited by slow procurement processes for the purchase of laptops for girls attending the camps, and interviewees also referred to lengthy regulations on LPACs and how this translated to the establishment of a steering committee, delaying processes in the field. In the case of Building Blocks/ Cash for Work, interviewees also noted that UN Women's internal systems for procurement and procedures were not tailored to either humanitarian environments or innovative approaches but were more suitable for the organization's typical conditions. More flexibility in protocols and faster response times to implement efforts successfully were cited as key elements to foster work on innovation in the future. As noted in previous assessments by IEAS, lengthy administrative processes have been linked, at least partially, to gaps in UN Women's project management cycle and practices. In this regard, it is essential to ensure that project designs include early technical support from policy and process owners to ensure that they are feasible from an operational, technical and legal perspective. Such factors and collaboration are especially important around enabling innovation.

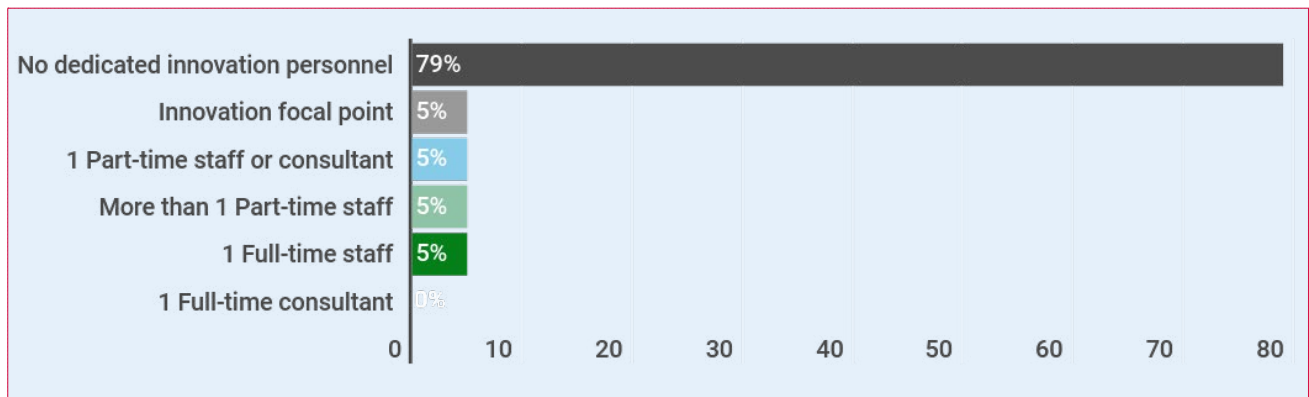
Finally, in relation primarily to technological innovation, there are possible financial and legal risks that need to be taken properly into account at the design stage. Project managers should clearly define these risks in anticipation of implementation of innovative initiatives. In the case of BFW, the Legal Office identified significant inherent risks that would result from UN Women either hosting or operating an e-commerce platform. These include risks related to the collection of personal data, involvement in transactions and the provision of services by third-party contractors. In light of these risks, the Legal Office has strongly advised that UN Women should only be involved in the design and development of e-commerce platforms - as in Costa Rica where the platform will be handed over to a government counterpart before its launch – and should not host or operate these platforms. In the various countries where UN Women is currently hosting or operating BFW platforms, the legal advice is to transfer the platform to external hosts/operators as soon as possible and in the meantime put in place adequate measures to mitigate the risks identified. These operational, financial and legal risks, and the lack of clarity about the different approaches of Country Offices to them, highlights the fact that e-commerce is an area where UN Women lacks expertise or appropriate legal frameworks and needs to tread carefully.

In terms of human resources structures, most case studies, interviews and surveys highlighted that to make innovation happen there is a need for personnel who are

open-minded, flexible, committed to trying something new and willing to invest time working around lengthy and complex internal processes. In terms of human resources dedicated to innovation, 79 per cent of survey respondents confirmed not having dedicated innovation personnel in their headquarters unit, Regional Office, or country presence, and 53 per cent agreed that the number of personnel is not sufficient, in comparison with 37 per cent that disagreed. While human resources seem to be the second element chosen as a constraint to innovation by stakeholders in the survey, open-ended responses from field presences and Headquarters units in UN Women referred to the fact that it is not only about more human resources but also about having a different attitude and state of mind in order to innovate. It was reported through interviews and survey data that in some cases UN Women country representatives did not encourage innovation but were more focused on achieving their key performance indicators. This also triangulates with significant evidence from case studies and the survey, which confirm that support to innovation from leadership at headquarters, Regional Offices and Country Offices has been mixed.

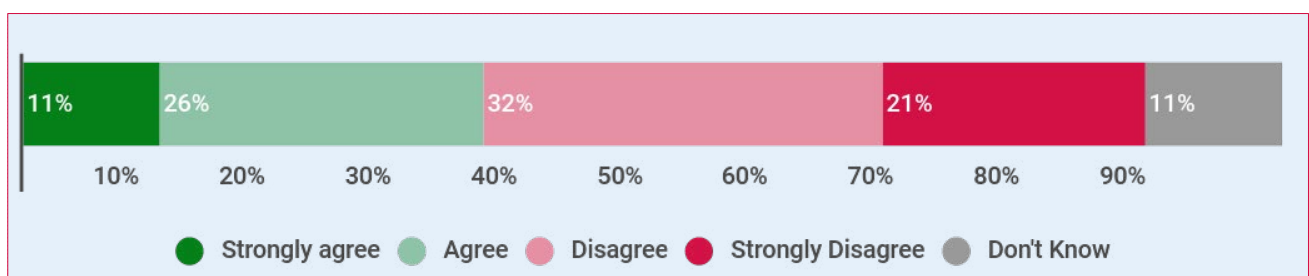
The below figures showcase the responses from regional offices, country offices and headquarters units on existing personnel dedicated to innovation, as well as adequacy of dedicated personnel to support innovation.

**FIGURE 7. Survey responses: Does your office have dedicated personnel in charge of innovation?**



Source: Evaluation Survey of UN Women Headquarters Units, Regional Offices, Country Offices.

**FIGURE 8. Survey responses: Adequacy of number of unit personnel to support innovation**



Source: Evaluation Survey of UN Women Headquarters Units, Regional Offices, Country Offices.

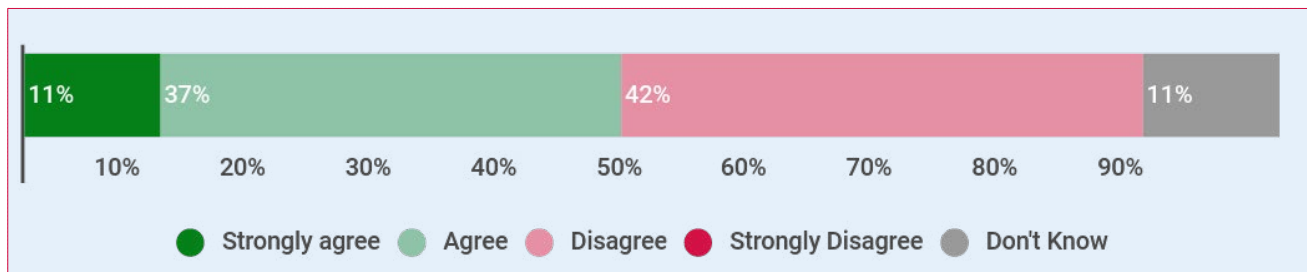
**FINDING 12:****Current culture of innovation is not conducive to optimally support innovation in UN Women**

Organizational culture – understood as the ways of thinking that shape how UN Women works on innovation – was mentioned by stakeholders as a key element to support innovation. Case studies, interviews and the survey confirmed that the culture of innovation is not yet correctly mainstreamed in UN Women to accept risk-taking and failure.

Aspects of the organizational culture appear as a constraint to innovation, mostly in relation to acceptance of failure and risk-taking. This is due to the limited spaces to discuss and learn from colleagues about failures and opportunities in innovation, as well as spaces to share on current technological and social innovations. Knowledge management and sharing around innovation along with supporting systems have not been in place until very recently in UN Women. The innovation work in UN Women does not seem to be well understood or identified by internal UN Women stakeholders, thus hampering the possibility to create internal networks and innovation hubs to foster new ideas.

Examples from case studies demonstrated that there is a lack of expertise in technological innovation and that people are fearful to experiment, as they were not sure that they had the appropriate skills to do so. In the BFW case study, it was reported that innovation is hindered by the absence of a culture of dialogue and collaboration in Country Offices specially around aspects of innovation, as well as by concern among some personnel that innovation and new ways of working may make their skills irrelevant. Interestingly, 42 per cent of the offices and units responding to the survey agreed that UN Women's organizational culture enables innovation within the organization, while 37 per cent disagreed with this statement. This reflects mixed views among regional offices, country offices and headquarters units and understanding of how the organizational culture is enabling or constraining innovation.

**FIGURE 9. Survey responses: Adequacy of UN Women's organizational knowledge and expertise to support innovation**



Source: Evaluation Survey of UN Women Headquarters Units, Regional Offices, Country Offices.

## 5. Lessons learned

A number of lessons can be derived from the evaluation findings, analysis and conclusions. A selection of the most relevant lessons is included below:



**UN Women has an important role to play in the normative and coordination space of innovation for gender equality.** There is currently no entity in the United Nations system taking the lead on innovation for gender equality. There is an opportunity for UN Women to take on this role, building on its expertise and credibility in leading normative and coordination work on gender equality more widely.



**Despite personnel and leadership enthusiasm for innovation, efforts are not mainstreamed and have so far tended to be piecemeal and small in scale.** In recent years, UN Women has deployed and trialed a range of different innovative initiatives, though all have remained limited in their scale and reach, with several not expanding beyond the pilot stage. Further to this, initiatives have tended to be led by individual Country Offices, rather than embedded in a global organizational approach. Innovation requires collaboration and knowledge sharing across all levels of the organization including Headquarters, regional offices and country offices cross-sectoral dialogue.



**The lack of a clear and agreed definition of innovation is hindering UN Women's efforts to be effective in this space.** Innovation was commonly conflated with technology or used to describe solutions that were new to UN Women but not genuinely innovative. There is demand for a clear definition of innovation that includes both processes and outputs. For any future definition to be relevant and useful, it needs to be to be systematically socialized across the Entity.



**UN Women's organizational structures, culture and systems are not optimally enabling its work in innovation.** Current organizational processes do not enable the flexible and agile approach that is required for experimentation and innovation. There are also organizational cultural challenges around personnel feeling safe to take risks and experiment with innovation and possibly fail. Similarly the absence of clear project design for innovation initiatives at the onset limits the possibilities of rapid adaptation of organizational systems.



**There is potential for the private sector to be a strong partner in UN Women's future innovation work.** However, at present there is limited internal experience in working with the private sector specifically on innovation – and with technology companies in particular. Any future engagement will likely require investment in internal expertise, tools and procedures to guide the organization in working effectively with a targeted set of partners.





Photo ©Photo: UN Women Africa / Senegal - Buy from women

# 6

## CONCLUSIONS

**CONCLUSION 1:**

**The absence of a clear definition and vision for innovation within UN Women hampered the organization from developing a coherent and strategic body of work in this area.**

There is no clarity within the organization regarding what innovation means for UN Women. Innovation is commonly conflated with the use of technology or with adopting a solution that is new to UN Women, even if the solution may be quite standard in other contexts. While this may be partly due to innovation being a new area of work for UN Women and a rapidly changing field, it is important that the organization addresses this gap if it wants to work effectively in this area.

There is also a lack of defined clarity on how innovation relates to UN-Women's mandate or contributes to its goals. While there was an innovation strategy document, an innovation unit at headquarters (operational until mid-2020) and interest in innovation among senior leadership, these have not translated into the development of a vision and execution of a strategy to guide the organization's work. Critically, there is no explicit theory of change that articulates how innovative work is expected to support change that could be used to inform strategy development, results monitoring and learning in this area. However, there is a shared implicit understanding among personnel regarding how innovation contributes to gender equality and women's empowerment outcomes, which could be built on to develop a theory of change.

As a result of this situation, innovative work within UN Women is currently a disparate and disconnected set of activities, often driven by individual interests or in response to ad hoc opportunities, with widely different strategies and approaches. These innovative activities do not add up to a broader and coherent body of work. Instead, initiatives are categorized as innovative in an ad hoc fashion, based on individual interpretations. Furthermore, innovative initiatives vary widely in the extent to which they adopt a genuinely innovative or experimental approach and offer new solutions, and there is no framework for measuring results from innovative work, or for sharing and building on lessons learned.

There is a strong demand among personnel for a clear definition, vision, strategy and guidance on innovation that can help inform choices at all levels about what innovative work to invest in, what strategies and approaches to adopt, and how to understand and measure success in this area. In particular, personnel would like to see a definition of innovation that encompasses both ways of working and the nature of solutions that are developed, and that is relevant for both technological and social innovation.

**CONCLUSION 2:**

**UN Women has not yet clearly identified its niche or how it can best add value in the area of innovation for gender equality. The organization could best add value by developing and incubating innovative solutions to the most challenging problems in gender equality and the empowerment of women, and by informing and influencing wider work on innovation within the United Nations system and beyond.**

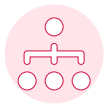
UN Women currently has a limited profile in the area of innovation, and there is no clear vision – either among UN Women personnel or external stakeholders – of how the organization adds value in this area. However, an examination of UN Women's current innovation work suggests that the organization has potential to add most value by fostering new solutions and by informing and influencing others, and that it should focus its efforts in these two areas.

The innovative initiatives within UN Women that appear to have the greatest potential for impact are those where the organization has developed and incubated an experimental new solution to a gender equality problem, has accompanied this with rigorous learning and documentation, and has influenced other, larger actors to adopt and scale up this new solution. This incubation role is well suited to the organization's limited resources and its in-depth expertise on gender equality, although it is currently hindered by inadequate tools. Adopting this

role would allow the organization to develop a body of evidence about what works in addressing the most difficult problems in gender equality and women's empowerment, which can inform both its own programming and its wider advocacy and influencing activities.

UN Women is well known and respected for its normative and coordination work and could add significant value by leading normative and coordination work on innovation for gender equality, especially as there is currently no United Nations agency playing this role. In particular, UN Women is well placed to provide gender expertise and evidence that can inform and influence the work of larger actors engaged in innovation, both within the United Nations system and beyond, including by drawing on its own innovative initiatives as outlined above. This is a role that external stakeholders, particularly UN agencies and donors, would like to see UN Women play and fits well with the organization's mandate.



**CONCLUSION 3:**

**UN Women's innovative work is not yet having a significant impact because the organization is not building in scale up plans to build upon or learn from this work. Critically, while some innovative initiatives are generating intermediate outcomes at programme level, they are not contributing to higher level outcomes at organization-wide level.**

None of UN Women's innovative initiatives have yet been taken to significant scale, despite some having been launched a number of years ago. The organization appears to have overestimated its ability to scale up innovative programmes and has been constrained by lack of capacity and strategy. As a result, there has been limited impact from most of these initiatives. However, it is worth noting that in a number of cases, scaling up is planned to be undertaken by a larger partner or broader programme, and these initiatives do appear to have significant potential for impact at scale.

Despite this failure to scale, innovative initiatives are generating a variety of outcomes at programme level, such as reaching a more diverse audience, generating new types of partnerships or developing knowledge about new approaches to gender equality and women's empowerment. However, these intermediate outcomes are not clearly contributing to higher level outcomes at organizational level, such as evidence-based programming;

stronger partnerships, coordination and influence; or improved norms and standards. This is because the learning and evidence from innovative work is not being used to systematically inform wider UN Women strategies, for operational activities or for normative and coordination work.

To ensure that maximum value is generated from UN Women's innovative work, it is critical that the organization puts in place the measures that will enable intermediate outcomes from innovative programmes to contribute to wider results and goals. This requires organization-wide systems to capture, document and share lessons from innovative projects (both successes and failures) and ensuring that this evidence informs future programming within the organization, as well as the organization's external coordination and influencing activities. It also involves fostering UN Women's profile and credibility in the area of innovation so that its normative and coordination activities in this field can have greater impact.

**CONCLUSION 4:**

**There are internal barriers to innovation within UN Women that need to be addressed in order for the organization to work more efficiently in this area. These include barriers related to organizational systems and to risk-averse organizational culture around innovation.**

At almost all levels of the organization, innovation is held back and innovative projects, more specifically in the area of technology suffer significant constraints and delays because organizational systems and processes are not optimized to support innovative ways of working. Financial processes, procurement, human resource management and legal frameworks are not built to optimally support innovation in which partnerships, planning and implementation may need to be handled differently, or where plans and needs may change quickly. In addition, knowledge management systems and reporting frameworks are not suited to support the monitoring, learning and evidence gathering that is critical a part of successful innovation. Lack of clear business owner and limited risk awareness in the conceptualization of projects from programmatic areas related to implementation of new technologies, add an important aspect explaining challenges in adapting organizational systems to innovation.

In addition, UN Women's organizational culture is not conducive to innovation. In some parts of the organization, for example in the Europe and Central Asia region, a culture of experimentation and innovation has been fostered and is allowing personnel to try new approaches and take risks. However, across most of the organization, to the extent this formative evaluation was able to assess, there is very limited acceptance of: innovation-specific risk-taking (with related acceptance of potential failure), space for innovation-related dialogue and explicit collaboration, and limited innovation mindset among personnel. Critically, while personnel are told that they should innovate, there is little guidance or support to help them do so. As a result, projects that are clearly not delivering expected results may continue and receive further investment because of an unwillingness to acknowledge and learn.

**CONCLUSION 5:**

**Innovative work can generate new types of partnerships for UN Women, involving both different categories of partners and different models of collaboration. While such partnerships currently exist within certain innovative programmes, there is potential to develop these at an organizational level.**

Innovative initiatives within UN Women have involved new types of partnership arrangements. For example, the organization has developed digital platforms that partners will take on and host and brought together civil society organizations, government and private sector actors to jointly develop new, locally relevant solutions to gender equality and women's empowerment issues.

Innovative work has also involved partnering with a wide range of actors, in particular with the private sector on technology-related innovation. Personnel across the organization recognize that private sector partners can provide valuable ideas, expertise and resources for innovative work on gender equality and can also play a key role in taking gender-responsive innovation to scale.

There is potential to move beyond the current ad hoc, programme-level partnerships with the private sector and develop organizational-level, long-term partnerships with private sector actors that can generate new solutions for gender equality and opportunities to scale up. However, at present there is limited experience within UN Women in working with the private sector in the area of innovation, and limited capacity to build such partnerships. The organization therefore will need to invest in internal expertise, tools and procedures in this area, as well as dedicate significant time and resources to building trust, credibility and a strong relationship with private sector actors in the innovation field.

## 7. Recommendations

### RECOMMENDATION 1:

#### Develop and disseminate a clear definition of innovation

Priority

**HIGH**

Timeframe

**SHORT-TERM**

Lead implementor:

**PPID**

The organization should develop a clear definition of innovation that is relevant to UN Women's strategic plan and mandate. This should cover both what innovation is (what constitutes an innovative solution) and how innovation happens (innovative ways of working). This should be accompanied by the development of a concrete strategy and priorities as they relate to innovation, and an accountability framework for roles and responsibilities. The organization should develop a clear structure with allocated resources for leadership and accountability on innovation.

This definition should be widely disseminated within the organization as part of a broader process of socializing organizational strategy and priorities on innovation. It should also be used in external communications, to build clarity and visibility on UN Women's role in innovation for gender equality.

Based on this definition, the organization should develop categories of innovation, with clear criteria to guide the grouping, so that these can be captured correctly in the RMS.



**RECOMMENDATION 2:****UN Women should focus on identifying the concrete value added of its work in the normative and coordination space related to innovation.***Priority***MEDIUM***Timeframe***MEDIUM-TERM***Lead implementor:***PPID** in collaboration  
UN System  
Coordination Division

UN Women should ensure that innovation is thoughtfully integrated into gender equality initiatives and that UN Women's work in innovation is positively influencing the normative sphere. This should be accompanied by a method of measuring UN Women's valuable efforts and impact in the innovation coordination space.

UN Women should draw on the lessons learned regarding the challenges and opportunities that have emerge in the development and implementation of gender-responsive innovative initiatives in order to build a knowledge base that gives the Entity the credibility to influence actors in the international development space. By taking these steps, UN Women will have the opportunity to establish itself as a thought leader and authority in the area of best practices in innovation for gender equality and women's empowerment.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:****UN Women should focus on developing, trialing and documenting innovative solutions for the most challenging problems and those that might have great potential impact in gender equality and women's empowerment and the most marginalized women, including women with disabilities, and on influencing other actors to adopt and scale up solutions that prove effective.***Priority***MEDIUM***Timeframe***LONG-TERM***Lead implementor:***PPID**

Given UN Women's mandate and its limited resources, the organization should focus its innovation work on trialing, documenting and influencing in order to:

- Build up a body of evidence about what works in addressing the most difficult gender equality and women's empowerment problems, as well as those that might have the potential to have great impact, which can be used to inform the work of UN Women, its partners and wider stakeholders working on gender equality.
- Influence and support other larger actors to adopt and scale up new solutions that prove to be effective, in order to ensure maximum impact.

This requires UN Women to invest in more comprehensive and organized systems and practices for capturing and sharing lessons learned in the process of piloting/testing innovative initiatives. Documenting and reporting lessons from innovative projects – including successes and failures – will help foster organizational learning; allow best practices to be replicated; avoid errors being repeated and ensure that unsuccessful initiatives are recognized and discontinued; and provide UN Women with the knowledge and credibility to influence other actors in the area of innovation for gender equality.

In choosing which problems to address through innovation, and which innovative approaches to trial, UN Women should prioritize developing needs-based solutions for marginalized women that can potentially be taken to scale. In doing so UN Women should consider a bottom-up approach to identifying and designing innovative initiatives that respond to locally identified challenges. Where digital solutions are being trialed, it is particularly important to develop realistic, accessible, and sustainable strategies to ensure these are accessible to groups that are most often left behind.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:****UN Women should develop long-term, strategic partnerships with the private sector that support innovation through the transfer of ideas, expertise and resources.***Priority***MEDIUM***Timeframe***LONG-TERM***Lead implementor:***PPID** in collaboration with **SPD**

The private sector is a potential source of ideas, expertise and resources for innovative work on gender equality. UN Women should invest in developing organizational-level, long-term partnerships with private sector actors that can generate both new solutions for gender equality and opportunities to scale up. This will require stronger expertise, tools and procedures. At the country and regional levels, UN Women should identify opportunities to engage the private sector in innovative programmes and to connect traditional partners such as civil society organizations and government to private sector support and expertise.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:****UN Women should invest in more comprehensive and organized systems for capturing and sharing lessons learned in the process of piloting/testing innovative initiatives.***Priority***MEDIUM***Timeframe***LONG-TERM***Lead implementor:***PSMU and PPID**

Challenges in the piloting of innovative projects should be reported based on an open and robust measurement of concrete results. This will foster organizational learning. It will also allow capturing and reporting on lessons learned in the process of implementing prototypes of innovative initiatives, which would give UN Women the knowledge and credibility needed to inform and influence other development actors in the area of innovation for gender equality.

As the term “innovation” implies undertaking something that has not been done before, UN Women needs to allow for the sharing of both successes and shortcomings related to innovative initiatives.

**RECOMMENDATION 6:****UN Women should decide on the best structure that would support innovation, match it with appropriate systems (policy, procedures, measurement frameworks) and embrace a culture of innovation.***Priority***MEDIUM***Timeframe***LONG-TERM***Lead implementor:***PPID** in collaboration with **HR and SPRED**

UN Women should decide on what the best structure for supporting innovation should be based on, and on the availability of human resources and evidence from current pockets of working arrangements supporting innovation. This can help elaborate a landscape of what works, and how to best structure this area. It should be accompanied by implementation of an appropriate policy, procedures and accountability matrix that can best support innovation in the areas of social and technological innovation. This should also serve as a framework for general risk and legal considerations when incubating or starting an initiative.

The overall structural arrangements should also include measurement and monitoring tools to allow UN Women to capture data on how innovation is contributing to UN Women’s goals.

UN Women should embrace a culture of innovation with supportive leadership and knowledge exchanges between regions, which would help UN Women identify what works and what does not work.

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The UN Women Independent Evaluation Service is co-located with the Internal Audit Service under the Independent Evaluation and Audit Service. The UN Women Independent Evaluation Service's main purpose is to enhance accountability, inform decision-making, and contribute to learning about the best ways to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment through the organization's mandate, including its normative, operational, and coordination work. The Independent Evaluation Service also works to strengthen capacities for gender-responsive evaluation within UN entities, governments, and civil society organizations.

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**UN WOMEN IS THE UN ORGANIZATION  
DEDICATED TO GENDER EQUALITY  
AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN. A  
GLOBAL CHAMPION FOR WOMEN AND  
GIRLS, UN WOMEN WAS ESTABLISHED  
TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON  
MEETING THEIR NEEDS WORLDWIDE.**

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.



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