

GUIDANCE NOTE

PREPARATIONS FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS FOR UN WOMEN COUNTRY AND REGIONAL OFFICES



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UN WOMEN

New York, June 2020



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The *Guidance Note on Preparations for Gender-Responsive Voluntary National Reviews for UN Women Country and Regional Offices* was developed in response to a need identified by members of the UN Women Sustainable Development Goals Community of Practice, operated under The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded-project “Acceleration of Gender-responsive Sustainable Development Goals Localization – UN Women Executive Secretariat Capacity Support Programme.”

The *Guidance Note* was produced by the UN System Coordination Division in collaboration with the Inter-Governmental Support Team at UN Women. The principal authors are Catarina Botto and Shivangi Shrivastava. The text was developed in close collaboration with Joann Lee and Sylvia Hordosch. Aparna Mehrotra and Sharon J. Taylor provided valuable guidance through the process of the development of the text. Many thanks to Ginette Azcona, Giuseppe Belsito, Hodan Addou, Hulda Atieno Ouma, Inas Margieh, Silja Rajander, Sophie Browne, Sunita Caminha and Usu Mallya for their valued inputs.

The UN Women Sustainable Development Goals Community of Practice was engaged in the development of the text. Several rounds of consultations on the *Guidance Note* were held with the members of this Community of Practice to garner feedback and input. Special thanks are due to all members of the Community of Practice for their comprehensive review and guidance: Alla Eddin Ayesh, Ana Pashalishvili, Ann-Mari Sundsten, Cyuma Mbayiha, David Saunders, Diana Louise Ofwona, Elaine Conkievich, Elisabeth Diaz, Engell Jaime, Erika Kvapilova, Estela Bulku, Fumie Nakamura, Gabrielle Henderson, Gerald Mora, Halyna Meshcheriakova, Irina Japharidze, Isiuwa Iyahan, Jack Abebe, Janekke Kukler, Josephine Moss, Lara Blanco, Laura Gonzalez Garces, Lorena Barba, Louise Nylin, Lucy Mathenge, Marta Gambarino, Maryse Rebecca Guimond, Michael Faraday, Miriam Bandes Zablah, Nargis Azizova, Rolando Crespo, Ryce Chanchai, Simon Beamish, Simone Ellis Oluoch-Olunya, Ulziisuren Jamsran, Vimbai Prisca Mukota, Yaindy Nuesi, and Zeliha Unaldi.

The *Guidance Note on Preparations for Gender-Responsive Voluntary National Reviews for UN Women Country and Regional Offices* was made possible through the generous support of The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

ACRONYMS

| | |
|----------|--|
| CEDAW | Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women |
| CGEP(s) | Country Gender Equality Profile(s) |
| DESA | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs |
| ECOSOC | Economic and Social Council |
| HLPF | High-Level Political Forum |
| LGBTI | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex |
| LNOB | Leave No One Behind |
| MAPS | Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support |
| SDG(s) | Sustainable Development Goal(s) |
| UNCT(s) | United Nations Country Team(s) |
| UPR | Universal Periodic Review |
| UN Women | The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women |
| VNR(s) | Voluntary National Review(s) |

INTRODUCTION

The [High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development \(HLPF\)](#) constitutes the main United Nations platform for follow-up and review of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development \(2030 Agenda\)](#). The HLPF provides political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development. It reviews progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda with the aim to integrate the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. As part of the follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda¹, Member States are encouraged to conduct voluntary, regular and inclusive reviews at the national and sub-national levels and submit Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to the HLPF.

The HLPF meets annually at the ministerial level under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and every four years under the auspices of the General Assembly at the level of heads of state and/or government.¹ Since its establishment, each year the HLPF has been organized along a specific theme and focused on a sub-set of SDGs for in-depth review.² Within the first HLPF cycle (2016-2019), each SDG was featured once with the exception of SDG 17 on Means of Implementation which was discussed at every HLPF session.

Through the VNRs Member States report on their progress on the SDGs and share experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned in SDG implementation. To this end, VNRs are expected to be based on robust follow-up and review processes at the national and local levels. As of 2019, 158 VNRs have been conducted (22 in 2016, 43 in 2017, 46 in 2018 and 47 in 2019) by 142 countries, with 15 countries having conducted more than one VNR.³ As of 19 May 2020, 48 countries have indicated their intention to conduct VNRs for the 2020 HLPF (and 11 for 2021).⁴

To support the development of VNRs, the UN Secretary-General has developed voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at HLPF which provide a framework for common elements within VNRs while allowing for flexibility so countries can adapt to their own circumstances.⁵ In addition, the United Nations

Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) [Handbook for the Preparation of VNRs](#), updated every year, supplements the guidelines by providing basic, practical information on the steps that countries may take when preparing VNRs.⁶

Several regional and global mechanisms also provide support and peer learning opportunities for countries in the VNR cycle. Preparatory global workshops are held by DESA for all Member States preparing VNRs. These workshops provide an opportunity for participating countries to learn from one another's experiences, as well as from countries that presented in previous years. In addition, UN agencies and civil society present knowledge products, tools and other resources that can assist countries in preparing for the reviews. At the regional level, the Regional Fora for Sustainable Development, convened by the five [Regional Commissions](#), are the primary platforms to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in line with regional priorities, including its follow-up and review process, and provide regional inputs to the HLPF. These are resources that may be utilized by national governments with the facilitation of UN Women Country and Regional Offices.

Within this context, *the Guidance Note on Preparations for Gender-Responsive Voluntary National Reviews for UN Women Country and Regional Offices* aims to support UN Women Country and Regional Offices on strategic

¹ The HLPF meets for eight days, of which five are dedicated to the thematic review and three days at the ministerial level.

² HLPF 2019, Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality (SDGs under review: 4, 8, 10, 13, 16, 17); HLPF 2018, Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies (SDGs under review: 6, 7, 11, 12, 15, 17); HLPF 2017, Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world (SDGs under review: 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 14, 17)

³ The VNRs, and the Main Messages, are available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf>

⁴ See <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>

⁵ Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum for sustainable development (HLPF). Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17346Updated_Voluntary_Guidelines.pdf

⁶ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2020). Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: the 2020 Edition.

engagement with the VNR process at the national level to ensure that gender issues are considered and integrated throughout the VNR cycle and subsequently through the implementation, monitoring and reporting of the 2030 Agenda. To this end, in alignment with UN Women's coordination mandate, the *Guidance Note* aims to leverage the VNR process to strengthen the integration of gender perspectives in key frameworks, policy dialogues and advocacy efforts for the gender-responsive implementation of the SDGs.

The *Guidance Note* presents ideas and tools to facilitate UN Women's country-level engagement and strategic dialogue with UN entities, UN Country Teams (UNCTs), governments and civil society to promote coordinated action for gender equality and the empowerment of women throughout the VNR process. This strengthened engagement aims to ensure that the UN system addresses gender considerations coherently and systematically through a participatory and consultative approach in its efforts to support Member States in the VNR process and with the ultimate aim to drive the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for all women and girls.

Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women through the Voluntary National Reviews Cycle

Efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda must be accelerated to bring about the deep transformative change required by 2030. At the time of writing this guidance note, the COVID-19 pandemic is unleashing a human development crisis.⁷ While in 2019 world leaders called for a [Decade of Action](#) to accelerate sustainable solutions to the world's biggest challenges and reaffirmed the crucial need for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls to make progress across all the goals and targets,⁸ the spread

of the pandemic has devastating social and economic consequences for women and girls.⁹ Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls.¹⁰ Not only should women's and girls' voices, needs and priorities be prioritized in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts, but their experiences during the pandemic must also guide the future implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The VNRs present a strategic opportunity to advocate for gender perspectives to be meaningfully integrated into national implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Accordingly, the inclusion of gender perspectives in VNRs at the HLPF is an indicator under Outcome 1 of UN Women's Strategic Plan 2018-2021: "Particular attention to gender equality and women's empowerment will be paid in the context of the following thematic areas/processes; the follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including by the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development."¹¹ In 2019, seventy-four per cent of national reports integrated a gender perspective.¹²

UN Women can influence the VNRs at various milestones of the VNR Cycle (see Section VI for timeline and roadmap providing further detail on possible entry points for UN Women Country and Regional Offices). At present, UN Women supports national governments and other stakeholders with policy advice, technical assistance, capacity building and opportunities for dialogue on the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including actions in support of SDG 5 and gender-related aspects of all other goals. In preparation for the HLPF, UN Women has also offered a range of support to key stakeholders including the provision of technical support to governments to prepare VNRs at the country level, the presentation of evidence and data in regional forums, and the development of knowledge products.¹³

⁷ UNDP. (2020). Human Development Perspectives. COVID-19 and Human Development: Assessing the Crisis, Envisioning the Recovery.

⁸ Political declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly, 9 September 2019.

⁹ See: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-sg-put-women-and-girls-at-the-centre-of-efforts-to-recover-from-covid19>

¹⁰ United Nations. (2020). Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women>

¹¹ See: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/executive-board/strategic-plan/outcome-area-1>

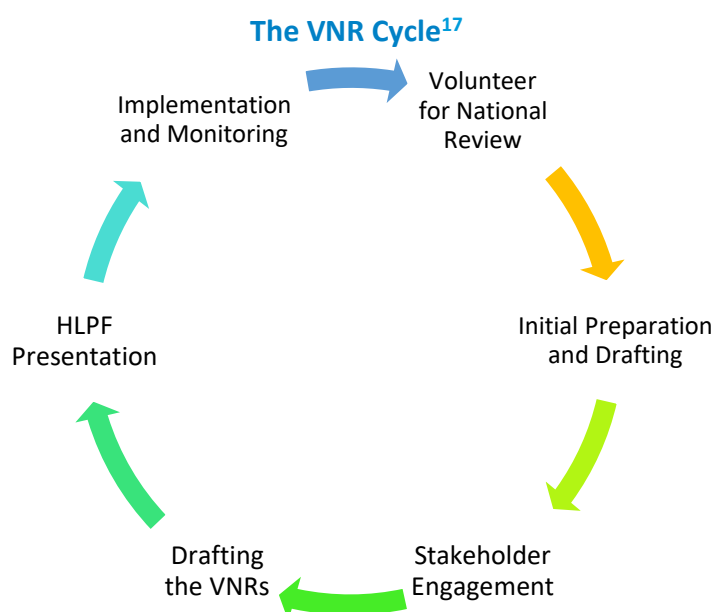
¹² UN Women. (2020). Report of the Under-Secretary-General/Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women on progress made on the Strategic Plan 2018-2021, including the midterm review of the Strategic Plan. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/executive%20board/2020/annual%20session/docs/dgacm%20temporary/unw2020%20edar%20incl%20mtr%20clean.pdf?la=en&vs=3421>

¹³ Annual Report of the Under-Secretary-General/Executive Director on the implementation of the Strategic Plan 2018-2021, UNW/2019/2

Analysis of the VNRs from 2016-2019 indicates that nearly all include general references to gender equality and women and girls in some way, while most also have some integration of a gender perspective (i.e. assesses the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels). A 2018 civil society analysis of the VNRs revealed that references to gender equality in the VNR reports centred on legal instruments (31 of 46 reporting countries), specific policies and strategies (25 of 46 reporting countries), and projects and other benefits that support women (24 of 46 reporting countries).¹⁴ However, less than a quarter of the reviews mentioned collaboration with UN Women in implementation of the 2030 Agenda.¹⁵ In addition, an analysis of the 46 VNRs presented in 2018 found that VNR reporting has not incorporated evaluative and gender-responsive evidence.¹⁶

Accordingly, the systematic incorporation of gender perspectives in the VNRs requires comprehensive engagement of UN Women Country and Regional Offices, including through technical assistance and guidance to national gender equality mechanisms and relevant

stakeholders to integrate a gender perspective in their national reviews. Country Offices of those countries that have not conducted a VNR should encourage countries to volunteer for reviews.



¹⁴ Together 2030. (2018). Progressing national SDGs implementation: An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2018. Available at: <https://www.iisd.org/library/progressing-national-sdgs-implementation-independent-assessment-voluntary-national-review>

¹⁵ Based on internal review by UN Women/Inter-Governmental Support Team.

¹⁶ UN Women. (2019). Equity-focused, gender responsive evidence: a blind spot in VNR reporting. Available at: <https://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/17497IIED.pdf>

¹⁷ Adapted from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2019) Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: the 2019 Edition.

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR CONDUCTING A VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW

The below principles aim to provide broad guidance to UN Women Country and Regional Offices to effectively engage in the VNR process in collaboration with UNCTs. These principles can be applied during national-level engagement with the VNR process, as well as throughout the broader support to the SDG implementation, monitoring and reporting cycle. It is recommended that Country and Regional Offices employ a two-pronged approach when engaging in the VNR process: first, provide gender equality expertise to national governments and UNCTs by engaging directly with the VNR process; and second, engage with multi-sectoral gender equality stakeholders, such as national gender equality mechanisms, civil society, the private sector and the media, to support and facilitate their engagement in the process.

Engage with the national lead for the VNR process at the country

Governments identify the national institution that is to coordinate and lead VNR development. Governments are simultaneously encouraged to involve stakeholders in the VNR process.¹⁸ The specific modalities for engagement are likely to vary from country-to-country and are to be decided by the national governments.¹⁹ Where possible, Country and Regional Offices may liaise with the national lead and offer inputs pertaining to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Support the alignment of national sustainable development strategies, national priorities and budgets with the 2030 Agenda

The VNRs constitute an entry point to build national, sub-national and local level ownership of the 2030 Agenda. As

the first step, and as emphasized in the Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) approach,²⁰ governments, using multi-stakeholder approaches, may align national sustainable development strategies and priorities with the 2030 Agenda. To this effect, Country Offices may play a key role in supporting Member States' priorities, including through UNCTs, by generating and disseminating research and data, raising awareness and building capacity on the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Alignment of national budgets with the 2030 Agenda to ensure adequate resources for gender-responsive implementation of the SDGs is a key aspect of this work. This is particularly critical to meet gender-related goals and targets. Therefore, Country Offices, where appropriate, may provide capacity-building support to governments, in particular national gender equality mechanisms or equivalent mechanisms, national statistical, planning, and budgeting offices to develop gender-responsive plans and budgets. Country Offices may also advocate to allocate and track resources for gender equality and utilize gender-responsive budgeting and auditing to do the same.

¹⁸ See [paragraphs 78 and 79 of General Assembly resolution 70/1](#) (2030 Agenda); Q&A for Voluntary National Reviews at the 2019 HLPF, available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/225292019_VNRs_Q_and_A_rev_09_May_2019.pdf

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ United Nations Development Group. (March 2017 Update) Mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Reference Guide to UN Country Teams. Available at: <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/UNDG-Mainstreaming-the-2030-Agenda-Reference-Guide-2017.pdf>

Promote holistic monitoring and reporting on all SDGs

Member States are advised that VNR reports consider all SDGs and not only those that are under review by the HLPF in a given year. This approach allows for comparability between reports, reinforcing the integral nature of the SDGs and the commitment of countries to the whole 2030 Agenda.²¹ Special focus, however, may be placed on some SDGs, depending on national priorities.²² Country Offices play a critical role in keeping gender equality issues on the national agenda throughout the VNR cycle. Country Offices should promote the systematic monitoring of SDG 5 as well as a gender-responsive approach to all 17 SDGs in the VNRs. UN Women's flagship report, [Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) builds the case for how gender equality is central to the achievement of all SDGs and argues for an integrated and rights-based approach to data collection and analysis across all SDGs.²³

Operationalize the principle of Leave No One Behind

The Leave No One Behind (LNOB) principle aims to identify not only who is left behind, but also the ways in which marginalization and exclusion are experienced and perpetuated. The VNRs are an opportunity to showcase how countries apply the LNOB principle to assess what progress has been made in reaching the groups of people furthest behind. Analysis across countries of who is being left behind demonstrates that women and girls are among the most disadvantaged and face the compounded effects of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

As such Country and Regional Offices must elucidate the gender dimensions of the LNOB principle and ensure it is integrated throughout the VNR cycle. This understanding must also guide the Office's engagement, from stakeholder

outreach and consultations, to analysis of VNR content to ensure that policies reach the most marginalized women and girls.

The [Leaving No One Behind: A UNSDG Operational Guide for UN Country Teams](#)²⁴ provides step-by-step guidance on implementing the LNOB principle, including an analysis of who is left behind, why they are left behind, what should be done to ensure inclusion, and how to measure progress and advance accountability in this regard. This guidance may be used by Country and Regional Offices in coordination with other entities at country level.

BOX 1

Highlighting the Voices of Women and Girls Most Likely to be Left Behind: UN Women Palestine Country Office²⁵

In collaboration with the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Prime Minister's Office, UN Women Palestine Country Office organized a national consultation ahead of the finalization of the first draft of the 2018 VNR in May 2018. The consultation was attended by 32 key national stakeholders including representatives of government, civil society, private sector, grassroots organizations and academic institutions, among other relevant stakeholders. The main objective of the consultation was to present the draft VNR and solicit the feedback of the participants on the needs and priorities of women and girls most likely to be left behind. Through the consultation, a set of recommendations to enhance the inclusiveness of the review report was proposed. Gender data gaps were also highlighted. The consultation also provided a platform for representatives of women's organizations to highlight the main observations of the shadow report that was prepared on the VNR.

²¹ Workshop for the 2019 Voluntary National Reviews at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, 16 – 17 October 2018, Geneva, Switzerland. Summary available at:

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21097SUMMARY_Geneva_workshop_FINAL.pdf

²² United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2019). Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: the 2019 Edition.

²³ UN Women. (2018). Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. [h](#)

²⁴ United Nations Sustainable Development Group. (2019). Leaving No One Behind: A UNSDG Operational Guide for UN Country Teams (Interim Draft). Available at: <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/leaving-no-one-behind-unsdg-operational-guide-un-country-teams-interim-draft>

²⁵ Case study provided by the UN Women Palestine Country Office.

ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES

FOR NATIONAL LEVEL

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE

VOLUNTARY NATIONAL

REVIEWS

Map and engage key gender equality stakeholders

Broadly, stakeholder engagement in the VNR cycle has been an area of concern. Responses to a questionnaire sent by the DESA to the 46 countries that presented VNRs in 2018 revealed that engaging stakeholders constituted one of the main challenges to the preparation of the VNRs.²⁶

UN Women Regional and Country Offices can play a facilitative role by engaging multi-sectoral gender equality stakeholders in the VNR process. Stakeholders may include gender equality mechanisms, parliamentarians, the private sector, civil society, grassroots organizations, women's rights networks, academic institutions, youth organizations as well as representatives of groups furthest behind. Such engagement yields a better understanding of challenges and potential solutions. Multi-stakeholder engagement also creates space for dialogue, empowers local women's voices and creates national ownership of the 2030 Agenda. Broad-based consultations that are documented and made publicly available in advance of the HLPF serve as a good practice.

While stakeholders vary by country and context, broad groups of stakeholders for the VNR process include:

- **Governments** – The primary ownership for the preparation and drafting of the reports resides with governments. The entities within the government responsible for the overall coordination of the VNR, or the national coordination structure, varies by country, but typically includes:
 - Government ministries responsible for the overall implementation and monitoring the SDGs, such as the Ministries of Planning and Development, the Ministry of Finance, and office of the Prime Minister/President
 - Inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms
 - Sector-specific ministries and departments responsible for specific goals including gender equality mechanisms
 - National statistical offices
 - Government ministries and institutions responsible for treaty body reporting

²⁶ Workshop for the 2019 Voluntary National Reviews at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, 16 – 17 October 2018, Geneva, Switzerland. Summary

available at:
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21097SUMMARY_Geneva_workshop_FINAL.pdf

BOX 2

Serving as a Link between Key Government Units: UN Women Tanzania Country Office²⁷

Chief amongst the challenges experienced by UN Women Tanzania Country Office when supporting the VNR process was the lack of coordination between the ministry responsible for coordinating the VNR and the Ministry of Health Community Development Gender Elderly and Children which is responsible for the overall coordination on gender equality in Tanzania. Thus, one of the primary roles of the UN Women Country Office was to leverage its partnership with both ministries to develop a viable strategy and ensure that the Ministry of Health Community Development Gender Elderly and Children is well informed and engaged.

With the support of UN Women, the Ministry of Health Community Development Gender Elderly and Children convened a VNR Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Taskforce meeting composed of representatives from the Ministry of Finance and Planning, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and East African Cooperation and the National Bureau of Statistics. The Taskforce set a framework to strengthen gender-responsive VNR reporting including the development of a matrix to track the status of gender-related indicators from relevant sectors.

As part of this process, the Ministry of Health Community Development Gender Elderly and Children further organized a VNR national expert team on gender equality composed of key ministries, including the Prime Minister's Office; Vice President's Office; the Ministry of Finance and Planning; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and East African Cooperation; Ministry of Constitutional and Legal Affairs; Education and Vocational Training; and National Bureau of Statistics to specifically work on gender-sensitive indicators for SDGs 4, 8, 13, 16 and 17.

National gender equality mechanisms are most often responsible for the coordination of gender equality related inputs to the VNRs. However, Country Offices have reported that national gender equality mechanisms are often not adequately apprised of the VNR development process. In these contexts, Country Offices may

support the national gender equality mechanisms, including through building requisite capacities and facilitating their collaboration with other governmental entities. Country Offices can also provide support to national gender equality mechanisms in convening consultations with civil society and women's organizations. Where appropriate, Country Offices may also advocate for the establishment of an inter-ministerial task force on gender equality led by the national gender equality mechanism under the national coordination structure.

In countries where UN Women does not have country-presence, one approach that might be taken by the relevant Regional Office is to direct efforts to support the National Gender Mechanisms with strengthening their capacity provide input on the VNRs.

- **United Nations Country Teams (UNCTs)** – The UNCTs, under the supervision of the Resident Coordinator, lead the process of extending UN system support to national governments for the preparation of the VNR. This is done through several channels. The UNCT may organize national and subnational multi-stakeholder consultations and reviews.²⁸ The UNCT may also convene various government departments to enhance policy coherence and support data collection to strengthen the evidence base.²⁹
- The UNCT thus provides an important platform for ensuring that gender equality advocates, networks and organizations are included in VNR consultations and reviews at various levels. UN Women Country Offices, in particular, can support UNCTs by facilitating inclusion of gender equality stakeholders and providing technical expertise on gender equality issues at each stage of the UNCT's engagement in the VNR development. Within the UNCT, it is important to engage Gender Theme Groups, especially in countries where UN Women leads them.

²⁷ Case study provided by the UN Women Tanzania Country Office.

²⁸ United Nations Development Group. UNDG. (2017). Guidelines to support country level reporting on SDGs

²⁹ Ibid.

BOX 3

Connecting Key Stakeholders: UN Women Timor-Leste Country Office³⁰

The UN Women Timor-Leste Country Office leveraged its existing role within the UNCT and link with the SDG Working Group under the Office of the Prime Minister to engage with the VNR process. The Country Office arranged consultations with civil society representatives, including members of the LGBTI community and organizations of persons with disabilities. The Country Office also provided contact details for relevant civil society organizations, contributed to the agenda-setting and participated in standby support for facilitators at the civil society consultation led by the SDG Working Group. This engagement ensured that gender equality and women's empowerment was adequately reflected in the VNR.

- **Civil society** – Collaborations with civil society, especially women's organizations, are essential to the VNR development process. In accordance with [paragraph 79 of General Assembly resolution 70/1](#), Member States are encouraged to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels which are country-led and draw on contributions from indigenous peoples, civil society and other stakeholders, in line with national circumstances, policies and priorities. Country and Regional Offices may leverage UN Women's convening power to ensure that civil society consultations take place and that the perspectives of all key stakeholders shape the VNR. An effective way to prioritize the LNOB principle is to organize consultations with marginalized groups to ensure that the voices of those who are hardest to reach are integrated in VNR development. Constituencies that must be consulted include civil society organizations, such as local women's organizations and networks, human rights defenders, LGBTI groups, organizations of persons with disabilities, migrant and refugee organizations, older persons' organizations, youth, indigenous communities and others as relevant to the local context.

³⁰ Case study provided by the UN Women Timor L'Este Country Office.

³¹ Case study provided by the UN Women Albania Country Office.

³² United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2018). Voluntary National Review Reports—what do they

BOX 4

Mobilizing Non-Governmental Organizations: UN Women Albania Country Office³¹

In the lead-up to the preparation of [Albania's 2018 report](#), UN Women Albania Country Office held substantial consultative meetings with UN Women's extended network of local gender-based non-governmental organizations which provided key inputs for the national report. The Country Office synthesized the outcomes and recommendations of the consultative process into reports, which were then endorsed by main national entities such as the National Council on Civil Society Organizations and the National Council on Gender Equality. The endorsements created a strong sense of ownership of the recommendations, which were then mainstreamed into the report.

- **Private sector** – The private sector represents a key partner with vital perspectives that can inform the VNR process.³² Involving the private sector can contribute to the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Country Offices may activate private sector partnerships, where appropriate, especially with businesses that have adopted the Women's Empowerment Principles, the primary vehicle for corporate delivery on gender equality dimensions of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.³³
- **Academia** – Academia and think tanks generate cutting-edge research related to gender issues in the country context. Country Offices may facilitate partnerships with government and academics/academic institutions to utilize the findings of latest research as a resource for national reports and engage with academics working on gender equality and women's studies at the country level.
- **Media** – Media may serve as powerful advocates for gender equality issues at the national level while also contributing to greater transparency and accountability with respect to the VNR process and report. Media partners may be harnessed to raise awareness about the SDGs and national sustainable

report? Available at:

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20549CDPbp201846.pdf>

³³ See <https://www.weps.org/>

development plans, as well as national consultations in preparation for the VNRs, and to disseminate the findings of the VNRs broadly.

Leverage normative frameworks and review processes such as the Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW and the Universal Periodic Review

The VNR process can draw attention to and reaffirm salient findings of key national normative reporting processes relevant to gender equality and the empowerment of women. These include the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (the Platform for Action), reports under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). For example, on the occasion of the 25-year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Platform for Action in 2020, Member States undertook comprehensive national-level reviews of progress made in implementation of the Platform for Action and also made linkages to the contributions made towards the realization of the 2030 Agenda. UN Women Country Offices involved in supporting Member States in developing these national reviews are encouraged to draw linkages between the national reports on the implementation of the Platform for Action, CEDAW reports and UPR reports and the VNRs. Identifying these synergies allows for cross fertilization of analysis and data and reduces the reporting burden on Member States, while also holding governments accountable for the various interdependent commitments made to reach gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Identify synergies with relevant regional and national frameworks and processes

UN Women plays a key role in the harmonization of commitments on gender equality and the empowerment of women between international, regional and national levels. Accordingly, Country and Regional Offices support Member States in translating their international and regional commitments on normative frameworks through national strategies, plans, and policies. The VNR process offers an opportunity to draw on these linkages between regional and national strategies, plans and policies and identify areas

for accelerated action. Thus, in coordination with the UNCT, Country Offices may work to ensure that monitoring of key national gender policies and plans, such as National Action Plans on Security Council Resolution 1325, are well integrated in the VNRs.

Draw on reporting on the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework

The VNRs may build on and be informed by the reporting on the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks at the country level. The Cooperation Framework forms the basis for the partnership between the UN system and the national government. It is informed by government prioritization, planning, implementation and reporting vis-à-vis the 2030 Agenda, including the preparation of VNRs.³⁴ As such, the Cooperation Framework ultimately strengthens the UN system's accountability for the support it provides to countries in achieving the 2030 Agenda. In this context, the Resident Coordinator submits the One UN Country Results Report to the host government and key partners at least once a year. These reports may be utilized to feed into the VNRs.³⁵ Country and Regional Offices may work with UNCTs to make gender-responsive data, reports and information on results of the Cooperation Framework available for the VNR drafters.

Leverage internal UN Women frameworks such as Country Gender Equality Profiles

UN Women-supported Country Gender Equality Profiles (CGEPs) are national analyses of the status of women and men based on both statistical and qualitative data in a given country. CGEPs are an essential advocacy tool for UN Women, and for the UNCT, as they provide a synthesis of all key information from normative, state and regional activities pertaining to gender equality. The purpose of the CGEPs is to strengthen national understanding and data by serving as a primary source for evidence-driven advocacy and programming for national stakeholders, international development partners and the UN system. Country Offices, in the process of developing the CGEPs, should strengthen the role and capacities of national gender equality mechanisms.³⁶ Similarly the CGEPs may be leveraged to support the development of the VNRs from a gender perspective, also within the context of the Common

³⁴ United Nations Sustainable Development Group. (2019). United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework: Internal Guidance. Available at: <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/UN->

[Cooperation-Framework-Internal-Guidance-Final-June-2019_1.pdf](#)

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ UN Women. (2018). Country Gender Profile Guidance Note.

Generate, use and distribute gender data and statistics and evidence

Monitoring progress on gender equality requires access to quality gender data that are collected frequently and regularly. Robust gender data, statistics and evidence is needed to monitor and track gender related SDG indicators and map progress on gender equality, making it a necessary component of a gender responsive VNR. In addition, the VNR development process can be leveraged to catalyze and create a critical mass of gender data and statistics.

However, collecting gender statistics that reflect differences and inequalities in the situation of women and men, girls and boys in all areas of life remains challenging. Challenges are even greater to collecting statistics that comprehensively capture gender diversity and the inequalities often experienced by LGBTI people. Achieving this level of information requires the disaggregation of data by sex and other characteristics to reveal differences and inequalities, the collection of data on specific issues that affect genders differently or relate to gender relations, and data collection methods that mitigate gender and other biases.³⁷ Limitations in resources and technical capacities make the production of gender statistics to monitor the SDGs challenging for national statistical offices in many countries which leads to significant data gaps in gender-responsive SDG implementation.

Through the flagship programme [Making Every Woman and Girl Count](#), UN Women provides technical and financial support to countries to improve the production and use of gender statistics in order to monitor the implementation of gender equality commitments in the 2030 Agenda at the global, regional and national levels. Projects under this programme include technical support to develop plans for the regular monitoring of the SDGs and to customize gender-related SDG indicators to national contexts; capacity-building of national statistical offices to improve

data production; support for the creation of national coordination mechanisms for gender statistics; and support for conducting regular user-producer dialogues.

In addition, UN Women Country and Regional Offices may play a critical role in supporting the use of gender data in the VNR process. Ahead of the VNR cycle, Offices may conduct a mapping of available gender data³⁸ that provides clarity on data that is readily available, gaps and implications in terms of providing a holistic, integrated picture on progress on the SDGs for women and girls. Utilizing this mapping as a guidance, Offices may liaise with national statistical offices to discuss data needs, and advocate that governments commit to collecting gender data that fill data gaps identified.

Where they are able to do so, Offices can build capacities for national statistical offices or its equivalent to generate gender data, statistics and evidence. On par with engaging externally, UN Women Offices should engage closely with UN entities that are working on the development of national data and statistics, capitalizing on existing programmes to support a joint approach to ensure gender perspectives, data and analysis are well incorporated within the overall VNR process, in line with the Common Chapter of the Strategic Plan.³⁹

Significantly, given that deprivations tend to co-produce and 'cluster' together, in their advocacy for gender data in the VNRs, Country and Regional Offices are encouraged to advocate for the collection and use of multi-layered disaggregated data. Particular attention should be paid to identifying the ways in which groups and subgroups of women, girls and gender-diverse people are left behind across different dimensions of well-being. Multi-layered disaggregated data may be collected and used across sectors to assess if the same groups and subgroups are being consistently left behind across different SDG-related dimensions.

In combination with official statistics, non-traditional data sources can be invaluable to bolster evidence and fill critical data gaps. Country and Regional Offices can advocate for

³⁷ Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (DESA). 2016. Integrating a Gender Perspective into Statistics. Available at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/standmeth/handbooks/05323%20Integrating%20a%20Gender%20Perspective%20into%20Statistics%20Web%20Final.pdf>

³⁸ UN Women offices are encouraged to also visit the website for UN Women's global programme Every Woman and Girl Count (Women Count), which provides gender statistics and sex-disaggregated data to inform national policies and future programming, including country fact sheets, available at: <https://data.unwomen.org/women-count>

³⁹ Working together to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Common chapter to the Strategic Plans of UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA and UN-Women. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/executive%20board/2017/second%20regular%20session%202017/unw-2017-6-strategic%20plan-en-rev%2001.pdf?la=en&vs=2744>

the use of sources for data that range from national statistics, national human rights institutions, international human rights mechanisms, International Labor Organization supervisory bodies, civil society organizations, including women's organizations, to community-level data. All or several of these, taken together, reveal gaps and trends in SDG implementation across different groups and sub-groups. For example, qualitative data, situational analysis or targeted micro-surveys (e.g. compiled by academics, civil society, community groups, or national human rights institutions) may provide in-depth information on groups left behind or at risk of being left behind.

BOX 5

Developing and Disseminating Gender Data and Statistics: UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific⁴⁰

In 2019, to support efforts by UN Women Country Offices to promote the relevance, collection and effective use of gender statistics in country-level SDG monitoring and reporting efforts, the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific participated in a regional workshop convened in Bangkok, Thailand with Member States under the Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism. The workshop was organized by the Secretariat of the Asia-Pacific Sustainable Development Forum to strengthen Member State preparations for the HLPF through the sharing of experiences, lessons learnt and data by UN agencies.

The Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific leveraged this workshop to share available gender data for the SDGs under review at HLPF 2019 and discuss the importance of tracking progress on gender-related SDG indicators for the realisation of the broader 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development with government delegations. The data presented was drawn from a joint publication by the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and the Asian Development Bank, [Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific: Baseline and pathways for transformative change by 2030](#). Copies of these publications were also shared with the delegations, for use in preparing their VNRs.

⁴⁰ Case study provided by the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

⁴¹ First Global Workshop for the Voluntary National Reviews to be presented at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2020, 19-20 November 2019.

Build on the previous VNRs

Member States presenting a VNR for the second and subsequent times are encouraged to address the gaps and challenges identified in previous VNRs; provide more in-depth coverage of good practices and lessons learned; and analyze new and emerging issues. A description of a roadmap for implementation and a financial framework may also be included in their respective VNRs.⁴¹ Country Offices may support this effort through the provision of substantive inputs and good practices that build on the findings of prior reports and assist to highlight progress made to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. In terms of consultations, several Member States presenting reviews for the second time developed elaborate systems for the collection of inputs from different groups and different levels of government.⁴² Country and Regional Offices may feed into this process and maintain and strengthen their networks by engaging with gender equality stakeholders consulted in previous years, and expanding these networks to ensure that consultations address the needs of women and girls most likely to be left behind.

Oslo, Norway. Summary available at:

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/25466Summary_of_the_first_Global_VNR_Workshop_Oslo.pdf

⁴² Ibid.

NATIONAL PRESENTATION AT THE HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM

The VNR is presented during the ministerial segment of the HLPF under the auspices of ECOSOC in July each year. Governments are responsible for the following three outputs:

- A national report (usually due in June)
- Main messages, with highlights from the report (700 words) (usually due in May)
- Oral presentation during the ministerial segment of the HLPF
 - Governments presenting a VNR for the first time are allotted a total of 30 minutes, with a recommended 15 minutes for the presentation followed by 15 minutes for the Q&A.
 - Governments presenting a VNR for the second time are allotted a total of 20 minutes, with a recommended 10 minutes for the presentation followed by 10 minutes for the Q&A.

Governments may freely determine the format of their presentations, including their structure and speakers. Member States, Major Groups, civil society organizations and other stakeholders are generally present for the presentations and Q&A. Although presentations are traditionally made by a Minister or a high-level official, such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, a civil society representative or other stakeholder may be part of the delegation or a designated presenter. Country Offices may play an important advocacy role in supporting the participation of the national gender equality mechanism and civil society as part of the national delegation presenting the VNR to the HLPF.

FOLLOW UP TO THE HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM

The value of the VNR process is not limited to the production of the report, rather it is in the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders in the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs.⁴³ In this sense, the VNR is not an end in itself; it is part of a long-term process which requires follow-up action in order to be adequately leveraged to accelerate the implementation of the gender-responsive SDGs. Follow-up actions are best planned in close collaboration with or jointly with UNCTs and other UN entities to ensure a common approach, and to reinforce joint messaging. Given its coordination mandate, UN Women can play an active role in facilitating these gender-specific discussions at country level.

Examples of follow-up actions may include:

- Draw on the findings of the VNR cycle to assist national governments in revisiting planning and implementation processes for SDG implementation, including updating national sustainable development plans and targets, monitoring and reporting processes as required.⁴⁴
- Support national gender equality mechanisms to set up a ‘road map’/follow-up action plan to implement gender equality priorities under the VNR in collaboration with civil society organizations. Noting their accountability role at the country level, this may also encompass a monitoring framework to track progress as well as joint advocacy efforts.
- Solicit feedback from all stakeholders on the presentation and review process, focusing on lessons learnt. This type of feedback from relevant stakeholders remains critical to best determine next steps which most effectively advance gender-responsive SDG implementation at the national level. This engagement also ensures that key stakeholder relationships are maintained and leveraged in long-term efforts.
- Provide technical guidance to ensure that stakeholders link the VNR findings and recommendations with the MAPS’ identification and implementation of accelerators, drivers and interventions in countries where the MAPS has taken/will take place.
- Leverage CGEPs to support the development of the VNRs from a gender perspective, also within the context of the Common Country Analysis and UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework.
- Leverage the high-level political will generated in the post VNR period to galvanize advocacy efforts on gender equality, including allocation of resources for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.
- Align UN Women’s existing and proposed activities and advocacy efforts with the key gaps and priorities identified in the VNR process to accelerate action on the SDGs in the national context, including by leveraging inter-agency efforts under the UNCT.
- Support joint discussions within the UNCT and its gender equality coordination mechanism (Gender Theme Groups, for example) on gender-specific follow-up actions.
- Identify data gaps as part of the VNR exercise and develop a plan with national statistical offices and/or other stakeholders to support gender data collection, including through building capacities of data producers and users and plugging data gaps as applicable.

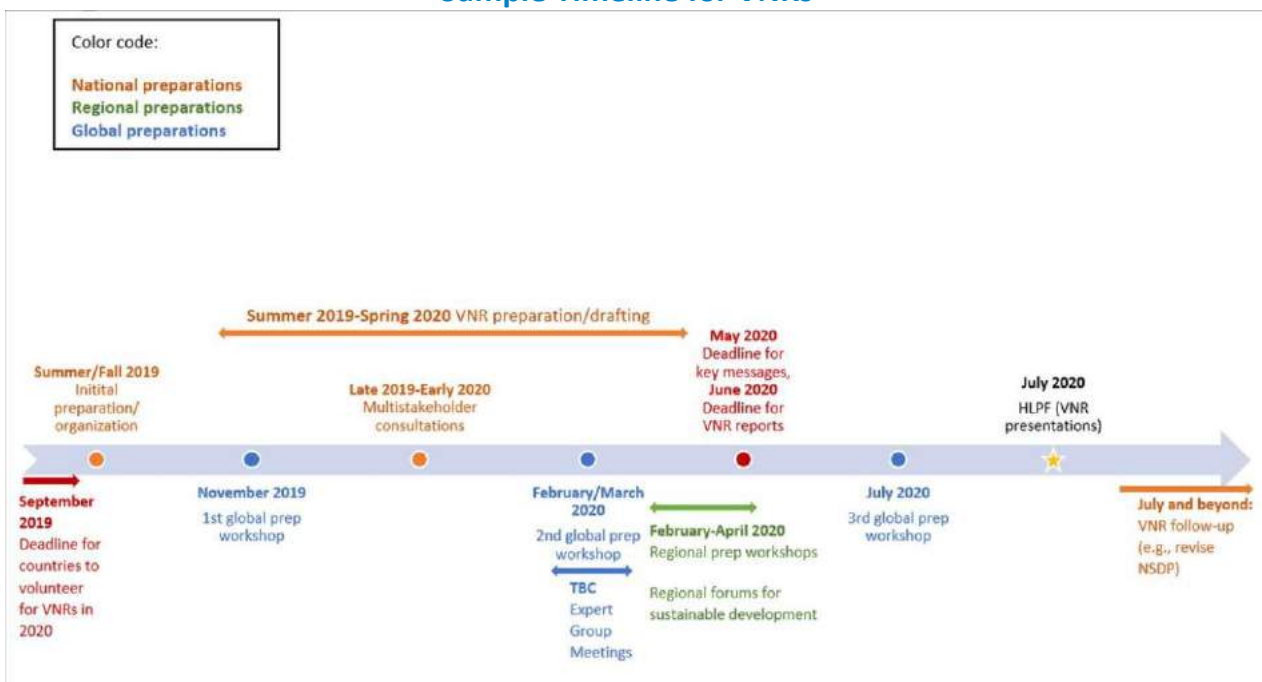
⁴³ Second Global Workshop for countries conducting a Voluntary National Review at the July 2019 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, 19 – 20 February 2019, UN Campus Bonn, Germany. Summary available at:

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2220901042019_Summary_VNR_workshop_Bonn_FINAL.pdf

⁴⁴ Ibid.

TIMELINE, ROADMAP AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

Sample Timeline for VNRs*



*Timeline above is a sample based on dates and deadlines for global processes found in the [2020 VNR Handbook](#). For national processes, timelines may vary. Please check with the UNCT or responsible ministry for the precise timeline for national preparatory process.

Template Roadmap for VNR Engagement

| Stage of VNR development | Country Office entry point |
|--|---|
| 1. Decision to develop a VNR | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare list of reference materials including key analyses, knowledge products, gender data and statistics • Map stakeholders who should be consulted • Identify opportunities to meet with the national VNR coordination/drafting team |
| 2. Discussion on UNCT support to VNR | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liaise with UNCT on proposed actions/timelines for supporting VNR preparations • Ensure a joint approach that addresses gender equality as both a stand-alone priority and as a cross-cutting issue across all goals |
| 3. Preparation for consultations/drafting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In consultation with UNCT, provide reference materials to VNR team • Support national and sub-national consultations, including the provision of financial and/or logistical support to facilitate the inclusion of civil society and women’s organizations • Organize consultation sessions with government, including national gender equality mechanisms, and with civil society organizations to build partnerships and strengthen the integration of a gender perspective in the VNR |
| 4. Validation of VNR | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liaise with the UNCT and seek to engage in quality assurance process for the VNR • Develop a joint approach through the UNCT to liaise with parliamentary processes, as parliaments have a key role in validating the VNR |
| 5. Preparation of delegation/ material to be presented | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify resources and propose gender-related inputs for the presentations should space for such inputs be available • Advocate for the participation of the national gender equality mechanism as part of the national delegation attending the HLPF |
| 6. Post-HLPF | <p>In liaison with the UNCT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solicit feedback and lessons learned from stakeholders • Link outcomes with MAPS, when applicable • Advocate and support government, including national statistical offices, to address gender-related gaps that have been identified • Draw on the findings of the VNR cycle to assist national governments in revisiting planning and implementation processes for gender-responsive SDG implementation • Draw on the findings of the VNR cycle to support joint discussions within the UNCT and its gender equality coordination mechanism (Gender Theme Groups, for example) on gender-specific follow-up actions needed |

Guiding questions to identify entry-points

- Which office/ministry coordinates 2030 Agenda implementation? Are there national coordination mechanisms or task forces/working groups? Is the national gender equality mechanism involved? If not, where are entry points for collaboration? How can UN Women leverage its role?
- Does the country have a national sustainable development plan/strategy? What are the possible entry points for including/strengthening gender perspectives in these plans and strategies?
- When did/will the country develop a VNR? Which colleagues in UNCT support(ed) preparations? How can UN Women contribute to strengthening the integration of gender perspectives in the report and presentation?
- Are there any UN Women programmes/activities at the country level that can be highlighted in the VNRs?
- What is the alignment with other processes such as Beijing+25, CEDAW, UPR, national action plans on 1325?
- Are there national/subnational consultations for VNRs? What are the entry points for UN Women and CSO partners to get involved?
- Who are the key partners that should be consulted to ensure gender responsive VNR development?
- With regard to consultations, can UN Women convene a discussion leveraging existing gender equality coordination mechanisms and partnerships?
- What are the key sources of data / research on gender and sustainable development that can be shared with the government team developing the VNR?
- Is there data available that is disaggregated by sex and other characteristics to reveal differences and inequalities? Furthermore, does the data adequately reflect the diversity of women and men and capture all aspects of their lives? Did data collection methods take into account stereotypes and social and cultural factors that may induce gender bias in the data?
- Which financial resources are available to implement the measures proposed in the VNR? What partnerships have been created?

KEY RESOURCES

- [Equity-focused, gender responsive evidence: a blind spot in VNR reporting](#)
- Flagship programme: [Woman Count Hub](#)
- [Handbook for preparation of Voluntary National Reviews 2020 Edition](#)
- [Knowledge Exchange on Approaches and Tools for the Voluntary National Reviews: Summary of approaches and tools](#)
- [Leaving No One Behind: A UNSDG Operational Guide for UN Country Teams](#)
- [Mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Reference Guide to UN Country Teams \(March 2017 Update\)](#)
- [Multi-stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation: A review of Voluntary National Review Reports \(2016-2019\)](#)
- [MAPS – A Common Approach to the UNDG’s policy support to the SDGs - An update on implementation](#)
- [Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2019](#)
- [Q&A for Voluntary National Reviews at the 2019 HLPF](#)
- [Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform](#)
- [Turning promises into action: Gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)
- [UN Women Brief. Better gender statistics for SDGs evidence-based localization](#)
- [UN Women Brief. Making women and girls visible: Gender data gaps and why they matter](#)
- [Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum for sustainable development \(HLPF\)](#)
- [Voluntary National Reviews Database](#)
- [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)

For up to date resources on gender and the VNRs, please visit the [UN Women SDG Knowledge Portal page on the VNRs.](#)



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