



Transforming Programming: Evaluation of the implementation of the UNICEF Gender Policy and Gender Action Plans

What is the context of this evaluation, and why is gender equality critical?

Gender equality is a global priority, yet no country has fully achieved the targets under the **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5**. Advancing this agenda requires leadership from governments and organizations, including UNICEF, a key player within the United Nations system. UNICEF's gender efforts are rooted in international frameworks like the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, alongside humanitarian commitments. As part of UN system-wide Action Plan (UN-SWAP) on gender equality and the empowerment of women, UNICEF reports on 17 gender-related indicators, focusing particularly on eradicating discrimination (SDG 5.1) and ending violence against women and girls (SDG 5.2).

UNICEF commitment to gender equality is articulated in the Gender Policy 2021-2030 and supported by the second (2018-2021) and third (2022-2025) Gender Action Plans. The organization takes a dual-track approach to gender equality by integrating gender into all programming across the UNICEF Strategic Plan and by targeted gender programming. UNICEF also integrates gender within the organization, intending to model the change it wants to see in others. The Gender Policy “commits UNICEF to a bolder and more ambitious vision for gender equality and the empowerment of all children, adolescents, and women.” It explicitly articulates the organization’s

transformative approaches to “work actively to remove underlying structural barriers – such as harmful social norms and gendered power systems – that perpetuate inequalities”. It acknowledges gender diversity, proposes to uplift adolescent girls’ rights and deepen partnerships with women’s and girls’ rights organizations by 2030. Gender equality is a cross-cutting focus, a core principle, and a change strategy within the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022–2025. The Gender Action Plans accompany the Gender Policy and are set out to support its operationalization.



The Gender Policy “commits UNICEF to a bolder and more ambitious vision for gender equality and the empowerment of all children, adolescents, and women.”

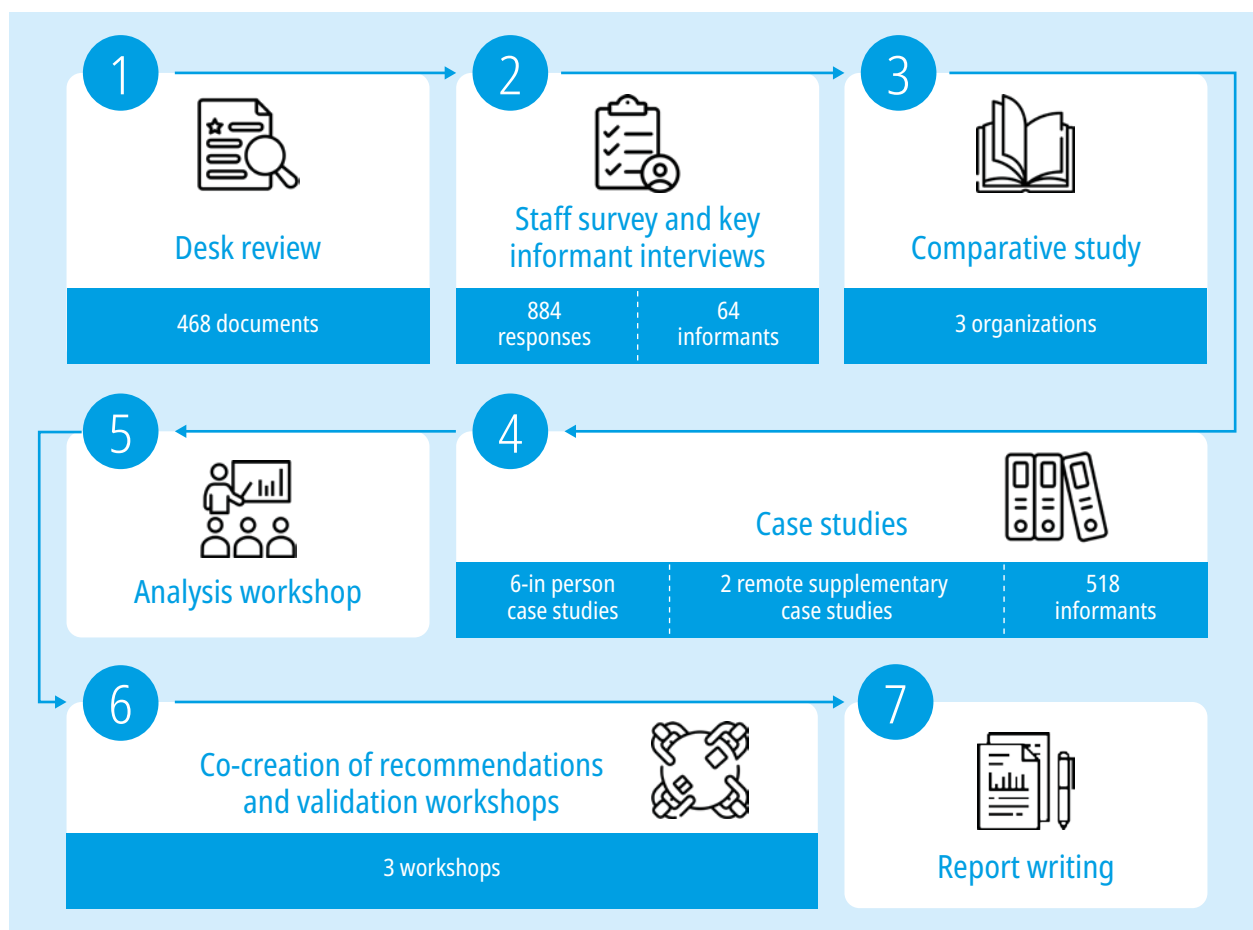
To assess progress and inform future programming, the UNICEF Evaluation Office commissioned a global and strategic evaluation of the Gender Policy and the Gender Action Plans. The purpose was to assess the extent to which UNICEF has integrated gender equality in its normative guidance frameworks within the organization and through its programmes from 2018 to 2023, including progress made in 2024, to inform a new Gender Strategic Plan, the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2026-2029, and strengthen gender accountability within the organization.

The evaluation covered three main areas of inquiry, including (i) the current Gender Policy and the conceptual framework of the third Gender Action Plan to assess the strategic integration of gender across the organization; (ii) gender-related organizational changes and performance enablers to examine how UNICEF policies, practices and systems support progress towards gender equality; (iii) programmatic results and integration of gender equality across UNICEF programmes, particularly to advance adolescent girls’ leadership and well-being.

Data collection methods and analysis

Using a participatory and mixed methods approach, the evaluation drew on both primary and secondary data to respond to the evaluation questions. The evaluation process involved (i) a thorough review of 468 documents both manually and through natural language processing; (ii) an all-staff survey with 884 responses and 64 key informant interviews with UNICEF staff to explore organizational and operational themes; (iii) a comparative study involving

three different organizations to identify good practices and practical ways to respond to some of the challenges experienced in UNICEF of integrating gender; (iv) six in-person country case studies and two remote supplementary case studies engaging 518 internal and external informants; (v) an analysis workshop; (vi) report writing; and (vii) three validation and co-creation of recommendations workshops.



Conclusions

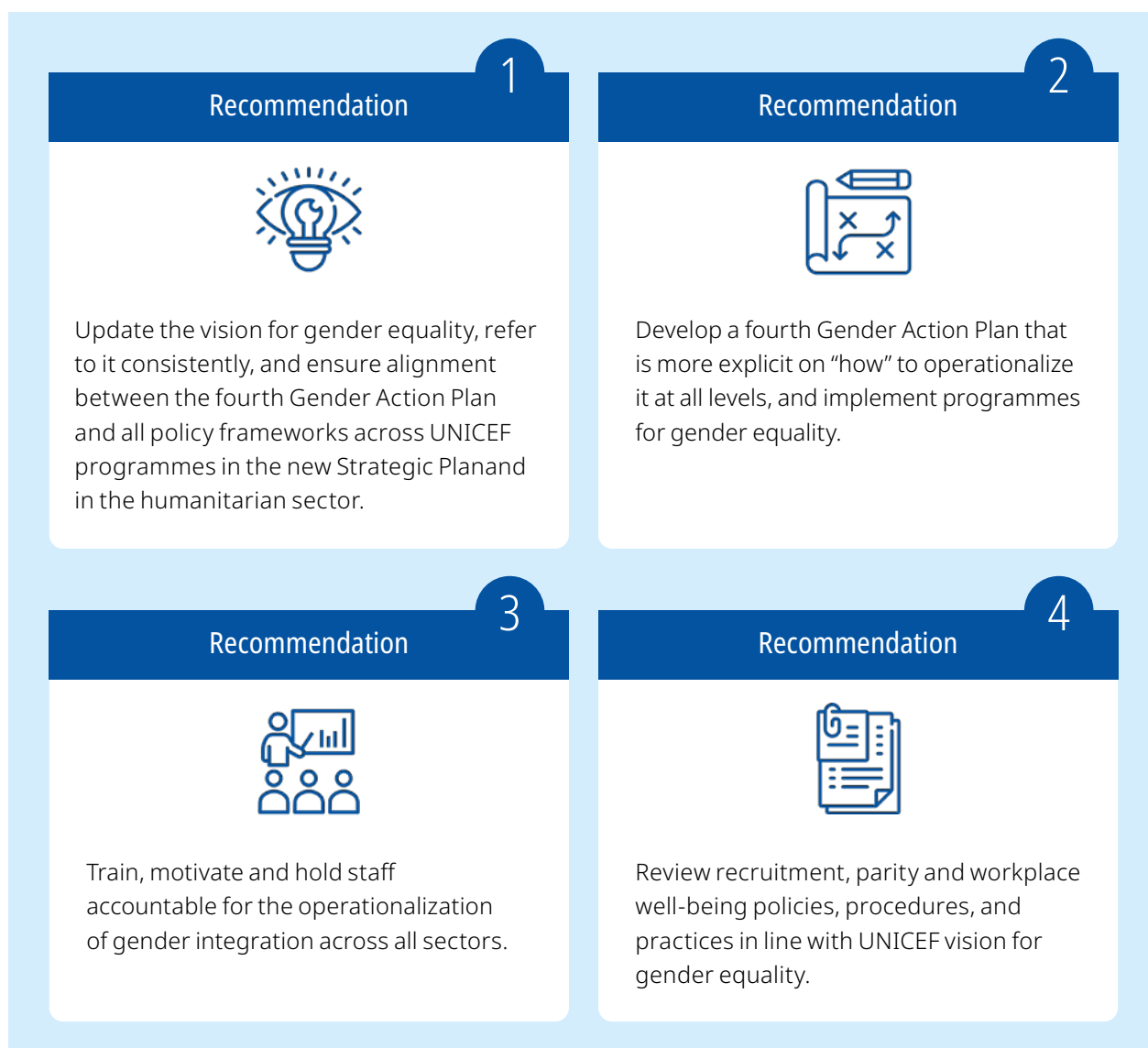
 According to the evaluation, **UNICEF is on the right trajectory and has established a bold vision for gender equality within the organization, supported by leadership and a pool of highly qualified, committed gender staff and champions.** Progress has been made programmatically and on institutional enablers; various accountability mechanisms for gender exist through monitoring and evaluation systems, benchmarking and gender architecture (i.e., through gender specialists and gender focal persons). However, **more needs to be done to translate this ambition into practice** by building greater capacity, ownership and accountability at the country and individual level; strengthening the gender architecture and the monitoring and implementation of transformative approaches; as well as improving the distribution of financial resources. The evaluation found that programmatic areas with bigger budget shares seem to have a lesser proportion of expenditure, in gender equality programming for transformative results reflecting a missed opportunity to leverage UNICEF status and achieve results at scale.

 **UNICEF is a better workplace than it used to be for women due to efforts to address gender imbalances in staffing and the workplace and the growing number of “gender champions”.** Measures to ensure parity, however, are not always applied as intended, and more needs to be done to ensure women’s well-being in the workplace, including the prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. The recruitment of young staff who are passionate about gender equality has brought new energy to the organization using the Gender Policy and the Gender Action Plan as a rallying point. This is encouraging for the future.

 **UNICEF should capitalize on the positive momentum gained over the last few years through the new UNICEF Strategic Plan and a fourth Gender Action Plan that focuses more on the operationalization of UNICEF’s transformative ambitions on gender equality.** This includes developing a more explicit narrative placing gender equality as central to children’s rights and clearly delineating its comparative advantage. The evaluation found that **the definition of gender equality programming for transformative results is not consistent across guiding documents and among staff**, which leaves room for personal interpretation and hampers operationalization and broad-based buy-in. Staff also reported **a lack of practical and operational guidance** on how to achieve and deliver on this level of ambition.

 **UNICEF programmes are increasingly gender-responsive and pay attention to the needs of women and girls**, although more can be done to take an intersectional approach to support women and girls in all their diversity (e.g., girls with disabilities). UNICEF is effective at delivering interventions focused on the empowerment and leadership of young people and adolescent girls in particular but is still not as effective on gender equality programming for transformative results, which requires taking a more gender socialization approach and tackling the root causes of gender inequality and working across the socio-ecological model. This also necessitates reviewing who UNICEF is working with and how, especially regarding **how the organization partners with civil society organizations, including women-led and youth-led organizations.** UNICEF could also better **leverage the scale of its programmes and multisectoral positioning** through the UNICEF Strategic Plan, which would require strengthening gender equality mainstreaming efforts, including in humanitarian action.

Recommendations



**For further information,
please contact:**

**UNICEF
Evaluation Office**
3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY, 10017 USA

 www.unicef.org/evaluation
 UNICEF Evaluation
 @unicef-evaluation.bsky.social
 @UNICEFEval
 Evaluation YouTube channel
 evalhelp@unicef.org

unicef 
for every child

© **United Nations
Children's Fund (UNICEF)**
October 2024