



## How Women's Rights & Feminist Organizations and Networks Participated in Voluntary National Reviews on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda

### 2017 High Level Political Forum

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This year marks the second High Level Political Forum (HLPF) since the adoption of the ambitious 2030 Agenda. The HLPF is the platform responsible for reviewing how far the global community has advanced in implementing the Agenda. This year 44<sup>1</sup> countries stepped forward to present their progress, difficulties and challenges as they began to work towards achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda through the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process.

The HLPF is an opportunity to evaluate how countries are doing in their efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. But accountability should not just be focused on progress towards achieving specific goals; it should also take stock of the strategies and processes developed by countries to ensure the robust involvement of multiple stakeholders, particularly civil society, social movements, and women's rights and feminist organizations, in implementation, monitoring and national-level accountability. Paying attention to how each country implements the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs is critical: the methodologies and processes used for the preparation of the review and the extent to which diverse actors are involved can help us assess whether or not the goal of "*leaving no one behind*" is being met in reality.

Women, particularly marginalized women, are still facing multiple structural and systematic barriers. Women human rights defenders have faced an increase in attacks and intimidation, and women and all civil society groups are facing restricted space for organizing and action, which adds roadblocks to achieving women's empowerment and women's human rights. Thus, we call on Governments to strengthen their political commitment on SDG5: to recognize, promote, protect, fulfill and guarantee women's rights, ensure women's access to justice, and end all form of attacks on women's human rights defenders.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally 44 countries volunteered, but Iran withdrew during the HLPF, making the total 43.

This paper analyzes the processes developed and adopted to prepare VNRs that track the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. We analyze the extent to which countries promoted and established processes to ensure meaningful participation of civil society, as well as the level, quality and diversity of the involvement of women's and feminist groups, organizations, and networks.

This analysis was developed based on results of a survey that was broadly disseminated through the Women's Major Group (WMG) listservs and other feminists and their networks that actively monitor government public policies in countries participating in the 2017 review process. Survey responses were received from 23 of the 44 reporting countries (52.3%) and from 64 women's groups or networks, some of which represented more than 10 NGOs. In total, the information analyzed in this report comes from approximately 200 diverse women's organizations.

### **Meaningful Participation:**

VNRs must assess progress, identify achievements, pending challenges and successes, and the contributions of various stakeholders. The process of developing VNRs should be inclusive, allowing all actors to participate according to their capacities, but on equal terms through a transparent process.

Participation alone is not enough. We consider that civil society participation, particularly that of women's and feminist groups, NGOs, and networks, must be *meaningful*. For the WMG, that means that a diversity of women's and feminists groups and networks have the right to express their opinions, to discuss and exchange information, and provide concrete input into the development of VNRs; not just to attend meetings and listen to speeches, lectures, or presentations of the VNR after it is already finalized (as occurred in many countries). In synthesis, the WMG seeks "Not just a seat in the room, but a seat at the decision making table." The participation of civil society should be the product of a broad, open, and transparent process, in which all of the diverse women's organizations that wish to participate can, and not only those organizations chosen by governments or UN Agencies.

In order to promote meaningful participation, civil society needs to be engaged in the process of preparation of the VNRs from the very beginning. Therefore, the preparation of VNR reports should be considered as an integral part of the ongoing implementation process, not an end.

According to our survey, many women's groups were neither informed nor invited to participate in VNRs. Among those who were invited, many were only present for some meetings, the meetings in which participation was focused solely on sharing specific information, and not the meetings focused on discussing and debating results and challenges.

Many of those that answered the survey mentioned they specifically asked to have access to participate in the process. Five indicated that they had no information about how governments manage the process of developing VNRs; however, only a few

countries provided that information. In 8 of the 23 countries from which we have responses, governments did not extend an invitation to women's and feminist groups to participate. And in 5 countries, women's and feminists groups were denied the possibility of bringing comments and opinions on the VNR. The reasons were not explicitly given, and women were just told that there was a "lack of time", "difficulties to contact the responsible parties", and in one case, it was clearly expressed that the VNR was the government's responsibility.

We were not able to compare the collected survey responses with the VNR text regarding the participation of civil society, particularly the participation of women's and feminist groups, because national reports were made available very late. In the few cases where comparison was possible, the differences in the reports of the quality and extent of civil society participation were significant enough to motivate additional follow up. For example one country mentioned a high participation of a diversity of civil society in different meetings, but the responses from women's organizations in that country were totally different: few were invited and were invited only to one or another meeting but they were not invited as a group to the same meeting.

## **Survey Results**

From the 64 women's groups and networks responding to the survey, 21 (33%) reported that they were not involved in any way in the VNR process in their country.

Among the 43 groups that were involved somehow, 25 groups were invited to participate in the process, had access to the official report and were engaged in drafting some parts of the report or were asked to verify some information. Five groups were invited to a meeting where the government shared the results of the final report but did not give the opportunity to comment and contribute to it, only to listen. Finally, 13 groups were only invited to attend some meetings that considered specifically a woman or gender aspect, or to listen to a specific report from a government unit, but had no other involvement regarding the process.

Many survey respondents mentioned that they had requested to participate in the VNR process, or to receive further information about the VNR, but in only a few countries was that access granted. In most countries neither women's groups nor civil society were invited to bring comments or opinions.

In some countries, respondents within the country had diverse opinions about their participation. Some were engaged in a very inclusive process, while other women's groups reported that they were not invited or informed about the possibilities of participating. These diverging answers demonstrate that the process for civil society participation is still not sufficiently transparent or inclusive. It is generally small women's groups based outside the capital that are often not invited.

## **Selection Mechanisms for Women's Participation**

In the survey, we investigated how groups/networks were invited to participate in the VNR process in their respective countries. Among the 43 respondents who were involved in the VNR process, 13 were selected by an open call from the government, while 17 were invited directly to participate by a government agency or ministry. Seven groups said they were involved in the process through the invitation of other CSOs or women's networks, and one was invited by a UN agency. Five groups could not specify by which channel they received the invitation.

The diversity of methods by which civil society groups, particularly women's and feminist groups, are invited to participate in the 23 countries demonstrates how differently countries understand civil society participation. While some use broad calls that are very inclusive and transparent, others are only inviting NGOs they know or know to not possess any difference of opinions.

## **Capacity Building Activities**

Most of women's groups that responded to the survey indicated that they needed capacity building support in order to ensure diverse participation in the implementation and follow up of the 2030 Agenda. Capacity building was also needed to evaluate advances and constraints in implementation of the SDGs, and allow them to take part in the discussions about VNRs, bringing their voices and opinions.

As such, governments must provide capacity building in order to help civil society and particularly women's groups, to participate meaningfully. According to most survey respondents, governments did not promote or develop capacity building activities. Only in 6 of the 23 countries, or 1 in 4, did governments provide specific capacity building support to women's groups and other civil society. For example, in one country the government supported a Coalition of NGOs to train indigenous women to be able to understand how to monitor development.

Access to information is also a basic need for civil society and women's groups to understand the baselines for each SDG in their country and to validate the progress or status presented in the national reports. Most women's groups indicated that they needed more access to information, but also that the information needed to be disaggregated according to different characteristics of women. Considering the diversity of women's organizations, they requested participation from women's organizations at the national level, as well as for local and rural organizations, those of vulnerable populations, and other small local groups.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the survey findings, the WMG proposes the following recommendations to improve the process of civil society and women's groups' participation in the Agenda 2030 implementation and particularly in the elaboration of the VNR:

### **At the country level:**

a) Civil society should establish national and local civil society engagement mechanisms, independent from, yet supported by governments, to ensure that VNR and implementation processes are open, inclusive, participatory and transparent. Women's and feminist organizations, in all their diversity, are an integral part of these civil society engagement mechanisms, to ensure that the implementation and review of the SDGs at national and local levels can be done in a gender sensitive manner, and in accordance with gender equality, human rights, and environmental sustainability.

b) Governments should establish open calls for participation in VNR processes and ensure that information about the process is widely shared with diverse civil society stakeholders, particularly women's and feminist groups and networks.

c) Governments should ensure that civil society and women's and feminist groups have the opportunity to provide meaningful input throughout the process of preparing VNRs, from the conceptualization of the report, to the identification of areas of progress and key challenges, and to the development of recommendations and areas for further action.

d) Governments, UN agencies and other stakeholders should develop and provide capacity building methodologies and tools to ensure the meaningful participation of diverse women's and feminist groups, grassroots organizations and other relevant civil society groups to the national and local implementation and follow up and review, including the VNR process.

g) Governments, donors, and UN Agencies should commit to providing technical and financial support to civil society groups and particularly women's and feminist groups, to ensure an inclusive and meaningful participation at various levels, including at the national and regional levels, and consider the different financial and other resource needs such as travel costs, time and capacity to prepare reports, and analysis of data. For example, in Nigeria some women groups outside the capital city could not participate due to the lack of funds to travel there. In Argentina, they had support to do capacity building activities with indigenous women and young people, as well as to hire a consultant to gather the contributions from all the participating groups into one unified document.

**At the global level:**

a) ECOSOC and governments should commit and adopt a clear and uniform methodology to ensure the participation of all stakeholders and especially the diversity of women's groups in all the processes and phases of the Agenda 2030 implementation, through an inclusive and transparent process, due to the need to reach SDG5 targets related to all other SDGs and must be clearly expressed in the VNR.

b) The HLPF should establish mechanisms to ensure that alternative information gathered and provided by civil society groups, sometimes in the form of alternative or shadow reports, is taken into consideration during the VNR sessions. Such reports should be the bases to promote a dialogue among different stakeholders with the countries under review, as well as other member states during the HLPF. Alternative or shadow reports are important sources of information for other United Nations structures and processes, such as the Universal Periodic Review, and could be a tool to further ensure evidence-based and inclusive VNR processes for the 2030 Agenda as well.

c) Governments, UN agencies, and other key stakeholders should promote the utilization of other UN mechanisms to review progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda, especially Treaty Bodies such as the Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, the Commission on the Status of Women, and the Commission on Population and Development.

d) Governments must strengthen political commitment to recognize, promote, protect, fulfill and guarantee women's rights, ensure women's access to justice and end the attacks on women human rights defenders. These must be included as prerequisites to SDG5 targets, particularly those related to discrimination.