

A Feminist Analysis of Our Common Agenda:

The Women's Major Group's Response to the UN Secretary General's Report

Background

[“Our Common Agenda” \(OCA\)](#), “an agenda of action designed to accelerate the implementation of existing agreements, including the Sustainable Development Goals.” The report includes Secretary General's key proposals across the 12 commitments from the Declaration on the Commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations as well as proposed key moments. This report was in response to a request from UN member states for a report-back with recommendations on how to move forward on current challenges. Already, member states and all stakeholders started discussing Our Common Agenda, including through consultations with civil society.

The [Women's Major Group](#) (WMG) to the UN is an intersectional feminist collective of over 1,800 feminists and women's rights organizations from around the world advocating for gender equality, human rights and a more just, sustainable future. The WMG was created at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where governments recognized women and girls as one of the nine important groups in society for achieving sustainable development. The WMG is a self-organized official participant in the United Nations processes on sustainable development. The Women's Major Group has the responsibility to facilitate feminist civil society active participation, information-sharing and input into the policy space provided by the UN (e.g., participation, speaking, submission of proposals, access to documents, development of sessions).

Our Analysis & Recommendations

Introduction

The Women's Major Group notes the Our Common Agenda (OCA) report and the Secretary General's goal of bringing the United Nations closer to its founding principles and objectives. We believe that this is a critical time for asserting the importance of rights-based multilateralism and the need for global solidarity, where inequalities are deeper than ever, democracy and human rights are under threat throughout the world, armed conflicts persist and explode, and our planet is at a tipping point, on the brink of irreversible damage.

In this brief response paper, we've compiled and summarized WMG members' top-line analyses on the OCA report, including our concerns, gaps and recommendations. We hope our analysis will support the Office of the Secretary General as well as member states and UN agencies in pushing for truly inclusive, human-rights-centered and gender just sustainable development, a genuinely democratic and just multilateralism and greater coherence across UN processes.

Key positive outcomes

A renewed social contract anchored in human rights

As feminist and social movements have long been calling for this, the WMG appreciates the reference to and emphasis on the need for “a renewed social contract anchored in human rights.” This explicit reference is an opportunity to establish and reaffirm the responsibilities of governments as *duty bearers* and their accountability to people as *rights-holders*. This human-rights-centered approach was not clear in the 2030 Agenda, so the references in the Secretary General’s report must signal to Member States to embrace human rights language. Accountability must be seen as crucial to this proposal of a renewed social contract, and the UN must hold States accountable to their people.

We’re reminded of the [Nelson Mandela lecture of July 2020](#), where the SG laid out the case for a progressive “New Social Contract.” He also detailed how a new social contract goes hand in hand with a “New Global Deal” to ensure that “power, wealth and opportunities are shared more broadly and fairly at the international level.” This framework aligns with the WMG’s commitments to the democratization of multilateralism and how dismantling power imbalances is what would truly enable more just, human-rights-centered development. However, implementation of a “New Social Contract” will also require an exploration and overhaul of the current hyper-globalised economic system (with its global value chains based on the exploitation of people and planet) and all the other systems of oppression. It also calls for a recalibration of institutions constraining governments’ fiscal space to generate the financial resources for progressive social policy/public goods & services including to valorise and support care work, expand social protection systems, and enable the loss & damage and the historical responsibilities by funding of climate adaptation and mitigation.

Here, we’d also like to refer back to the [statement on a “rights-based social contract”](#) made by the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights at the Human Rights Council’s (HRC) 3rd intersessional meeting for dialogue and cooperation on Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In this speech, Ms. Ilze Brands Kehris speaks to the human rights crises exacerbated and caused by the COVID pandemic and centers on key messages regarding SDGs 10 and 16. Namely, she calls out the underinvestment in public services and widespread austerity measures, insisting that governments must invest the maximum of available resources in the realization of social and economic rights.

The WMG recommends further expanding the concept of a renewed social contract to include principles of ecological and environmental justice. The UN and governments would benefit from a deepening into the notion of an *eco-social contract*, which combines the rights of people within planetary boundaries, with special emphasis on human rights and gender justice. This concept is explored in the [UNRISD brief, “A New Eco-Social Contract”](#) and is vital to deliver on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The section on a renewed social contract also included a timely emphasis on the care economy, and the importance of its value being added to the calculations of economic development. This has been a central tenet of the work of the WMG and feminists movements. The care economy must be recognized and valued, as women, girls, non-binary and gender-expansive people continue to act as “shock absorbers” within neoliberal, patriarchal, systems. With little or no remuneration, we continue to fill the gaps of where states have failed us, such as in lacking and underfunded care, decent work and social protection systems. For these reasons and more, we are glad to see the care economy is explicitly highlighted.

Moreover, we appreciate the emphasis placed by the Secretary General on eradicating misinformation and disinformation. As the report says, “we must make lying wrong again.” We hope that this commitment rings true across the UN member states for all policy areas. The link to a new “Global Digital Compact” narrows the focus away from freedom of speech, the media, and other rights, and it risks receding digital governance to a multistakeholder initiative that prioritizes the interests of the private sector.

Key concerns and gaps

Authoritarianism and anti-rights actors must be condemned

The OCA report fails to meaningfully address and grapple with the rise of authoritarianism and anti-rights movements and actors within States. This blatant gap in the report is of great concern to the WMG, as we are acutely aware of the threats authoritarianism and anti-rights movements pose to multilateralism and achieving a just, sustainable world with human rights for ALL. We are witnessing increasingly violent geopolitical contexts and the constellation among the UN’s member states, with an increasing number of countries having turned to authoritarianism and denying human rights, watering down already agreed language in resolutions, despite their stated commitments to human rights conventions and most recently openly defying the UN Charter. These anti-rights attacks throughout the world target the rights of women, girls and LGBTQI+ communities first and foremost.

We are concerned that the OCA report only obliquely addresses this dire situation. In our view, it ought to be the unique role of the SG, as the “pen holder” of the Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), to explicitly condemn the increasingly frequent oppression, persecution and murder of ever larger numbers of human rights and environmental defenders, feminists, climate activists and journalists, especially those from marginalized communities. The SG’s commitment to defending human rights needs to be called out over and over again, it cannot be a pick-and-choose situation, and right now, he is strong on some counts but very weak on others.

Corporate capture of the UN

It is extremely concerning to see the spotlight that the OCA text puts on the private sector. Starting at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992, the business sector has received a status as a stakeholder. From the onset, this inclusion of the private sector was a major mis-step for two reasons. Firstly, the business sector has a very different rationale from civil society - its core aim is to be *commercially* profitable. Progressive civil society has a *political* role, defending human rights, social and economic justice, climate and environmental justice, gender equality, and beyond. Second, the international business sector has, over the past 30 years - due to neoliberal policy-making and the evolution of exploitative global value chains in hyper-capitalist practice - emerged as a powerful force which can (and does) out-manuever not-for-profit civil society, and even sometimes entire nation states through dispute resolution processes. Its power and accountability are NOT equal to that of other stakeholders, such as the civil society, trade unions, academy, local communities, Indigenous Peoples, and more. Very often their unlimited extractivism *sans* accountability results in displacement of local populations and depletes their lives of the resources they need to survive, and in turn criminalizes their struggles to defend their lives and land.

Therefore, the private sector can never be a real and equal stakeholder without having effective accountability mechanisms within multilateral institutions. It is obvious that we all - the UN system, member states, civil society - work and interface with the private sector, and we will continue to do so (see the Generation Equality process as an example, or the Open Intergovernmental Group on Business and Human Rights) so as to influence the private sector to abide by human rights and core labor standards. However, granting the private sector equivalent status in UN processes will further deepen the inequalities we already face.

Despite its attempts to emphasize human rights in the renewed social contract section, across the OCA report we see a referential firm commitment to the private sector as "a key actor" without ever explicitly demanding this mandatory accountability and respect for human rights. For instance, in paragraph 120, the OCA text refers to: "the increasing role and influence of the private sector, and its centrality to achieving so many of the actions outlined in this report, will also be taken into account within the United Nations system. The business and human rights agenda is important in this regard." Here, we would hope the Secretary General could commit to supporting, or at least encouraging, the negotiations on a Binding Treaty on Business and Human Rights, underway at the Human Rights Council. In this regard, as an example of the unchecked power of the corporate sector and how the UN allows it to advance, the WMG has long warned against public-private partnerships (PPPs), which are not put through accountability mechanisms and where one player - the private sector - is profit-driven. PPPs are the reasons for many of our inequalities today, especially in public services such as health, education, social services, care services as well as with regards to decent work. PPPs must end if we are forging "a common agenda" that prioritizes equity and availability for all.

The WMG would like to echo the [Civil Society Financing for Development \(CS FfD\) Group's response to the OCA text](#), which also details extreme concern with the OCA's global governance proposals which, as the CS FfD group eloquently phrased:

“Rather than reaffirm the role of universal and democratic intergovernmental processes, the [OCA] proposals rely on new multi-stakeholder approaches, termed ‘networked multilateralism’ in the SG report, that bring to the decision-making table the global corporate monopolies and international financial actors that have concentrated wealth and power, subsumed regions into debt and austerity, eroded environmental integrity, exacerbated poverty and human rights violations, actively undermined equal and just access to vaccines, and profited from disasters.”

Their [response paper](#) further details the negative impacts of the proposed new multi-stakeholder approaches that emphasize the corporate sector, which we'd like to amplify here as well.

Networked and inclusive multilateralism can be dangerous without ensuring equitable power and accountability to all stakeholders in the process. Moreover, as WMG, we strongly disagree with the note on paragraph 107, that “ultimately what matters is results.” This is a worrying notion that can cause many who are already marginalized and excluded to be further left behind. While we agree that achieving results on all the SDGs is a key objective of our work, human rights, gender and social and climate justice achieved by transparent processes are part and parcel of such “results”.

Gaps in consultations and the need for co-production. Who will be left behind?

WMG members noted a lack of transparency in the process of developing the OCA report, including possible gaps in who was consulted. The report mentions that the Office of the Secretary General held wide-ranging consultations, however, there is little information on how these took place. We would like to be briefed and informed on this process - which countries were consulted and in what format, which entities in the UN system involved and were the MGoS heard. For example the work of UNRISD (UN Research Institute for Social Development) which has researched and published widely on the eco-social contract concept is not reflected in the report.

In this same realm of consultations and partnerships, the report details that we need “institutions that listen.” However, as the WMG and feminist and social movements we affirm the principle of “Nothing About Us Without Us.” We cannot stop at institutions listening, and we must go beyond surface-level consultations and partnerships. We want the co-production of policies. Feminist activists, Indigenous women, rural and grassroots women, girls, non-binary and gender-expansive folks, need to be co-drafting the policies that affect their lives. In the Secretary General's proposals, he shows a tendency to bring together the same committees of traditional experts; following the same scheme as always. Bringing together traditional experts reinforces the same

power structures and dynamics instead of the truly transformative ideas needed to change global governance.

Similarly, the WMG has many questions and concerns regarding who and what will be left behind in the implementation of some of the Secretary-General's more concrete proposals. For instance, the composition of the High-Level Advisory Board will be important. Will it have a gender balance? Will it include those politicians that are willing to challenge the unequal economic and geopolitical and climate-harming systems we have today? Will undemocratic and authoritarian actors influence that space? Similarly, we ask: why does the UN keep proposing new formats and boards instead of strengthening and empowering existing ones? Which processes will be weakened by the creation of new ones, and how can the UN really ensure coherence between them all? We also note the importance of most new offices and roles within the UN being directed for youth and Future Generations. However, considering the current budget crisis within the UN system, where will the budget for these come from? And along with this question, what will be cut and how do we ringfence/protect the budgets for the UN secretariat, funds and programmes, the agencies and for peacekeeping?

Gender analysis falls short

We note that gender is mentioned throughout the OCA Report, however, it falls short of meaningful gender analysis. For instance, we would like to see an outright argument beyond gender equality. Women's and girl's rights appear mostly as an addendum to the issues, such as "and for women and girls," "including women," etc. We would have hoped for a more integrated and systemic approach to women's human rights and gender equality. While there is more emphasis on women and girls in social and human rights related paragraphs, unfortunately there are less references on climate and economy related points, when the issue of gender equality is, and should be cross-cutting, and inequalities are generated by economic and nature-related exploitation. Any commitment to gender equality is not complete without consideration for intersecting forms of oppression and inequalities. The OCA text has huge gaps in addressing intersectional issues. As a further example, never in the report are issues at the forefront of migrant justice movements addressed, such as the repeal of border policy and immigration laws, which are key for people's human rights to be protected, are not addressed. Ongoing refoulement in contravention of the right to asylum is not addressed - and as we know, more than half of all refugees and internally displaced persons are women and children.

Furthermore, gender equality is most strictly limited to the rights of women, with girls being mentioned albeit to a lesser extent. Most importantly, the text ignores the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals, except implicitly, but only in passing in the section on discrimination. The Secretary General's analysis of gender is one-dimensional if it does not truly encompass gender diversity and intersectionality. This falls behind commitments made at the Human Rights Council and other UN spaces.

We are also concerned about not seeing a single reference to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in this report, when these are one of the primary rights that are under threat for many women, girls, non-binary and gender-expansive folks. SRHR, including to comprehensive and inclusive sexual education and the right to safe, free and legal abortion, are at the first line of attack by the anti-rights and anti-gender movements. This is of great concern also in light of the continuous flagrant use of rape as a weapon of war.

Systemic and structural analysis is missing

As mentioned in the section above on gender analysis, the Secretary General's report is fundamentally flawed because it does not include systemic or structural analyses at its core. When speaking of inequalities and global challenges, the WMG and civil society movements more broadly, understand these as directly stemming from dominant, oppressive systems – neoliberalism, colonialism, cis-hetero-patriarchy, militarism, white supremacy, hyperglobalisation/unfettered capitalism – that operate around the world. The OCA text does not address these systems, just the effects of it. By not addressing root causes, or even naming them, the OCA text fails to guide us towards systemic and real solutions and alternatives.

By not addressing colonialism, for instance, the Secretary General fails to make transformative proposals. For instance, as noted by a WMG member, it would have been important to express recognition that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) did not originally include most of the population or cultures of the world, and that on its 75th anniversary the same mistake would not be made.

The OCA report also fails to grapple with the fact that, even before the pandemic, most of the planet's population lived in different interconnected crises. Feminist civil society, Indigenous Peoples, migrants, refugees, informal sector workers, the climate and environmental movement, and especially those most marginalized and at the grassroots, have long felt the effects of intersecting crises and warned against them. Our systems are not built for the majority, but rather to benefit a minority of privileged people and States. It is not something new or that we have learned from the pandemic. The pandemic just revealed, exacerbated and compounded pre-existing structural barriers and inequalities.

Although numerous armed conflicts have taken and disrupted the lives of millions of people since the end of WWII, the OCA report's section on peace begins by praising the successes of the multilateral system in avoiding a third world war. In order to respond to different emerging risks and threats, the report calls for the creation of a new agenda for peace. This would include investment in prevention and peacebuilding and disarmament, based on a "better understanding of the underlying drivers and systems of influence that are sustaining conflict". Although these proposals, as well as a focus on gender, are a positive step, the report fails to identify and grapple with the many structural causes of armed conflict and violence, including militarism, imperialism, great power competition, lack of accountability, and growing violations of international law and even the UN Charter by powerful member states. There are ample existing commitments and

frameworks that can be leveraged for peace and conflict prevention, but it is critical to tackle the structural root causes of conflict, rather than its side effects. This should be done through bottom-up, rather than top-down, frameworks for building peace." And further references should be given to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and its following resolutions.

In failing to name the problematic systems that dominate the global social, economic and climate landscape and got us into these crises in the first place, the OCA report also fails to provide us with proposals that meet the needs of this moment. We need a real commitment to inclusive, radically just and democratic global governance that incorporates and centers communities and civil society. For instance, the WMG is disappointed to see the perpetuation of false solutions in the section on climate. The SG shows his commitment to emphasizing Net Zero, not real zero and feminist solutions to the climate crisis.

Conclusion

The current global geopolitical context is fraught with intersecting crises: armed conflict, environmental destruction, climate crisis, public health emergencies and exacerbated economic, social and political inequalities. On top of this, the increasing impact of undemocratic and authoritarian actors, both within and outside of the United Nations, is putting all our futures at risk.

To ensure that we fulfill the founding principles of the United Nations, to build just futures and make our way out of the systemic crises exacerbated by the pandemic, we need a United Nations that fully centers human rights, gender equality and defends democracy, accountability, justice and peace (and peaceful resolution of conflicts).

WMG welcomes that in paragraph 130, the OCA defends the broadest participation of progressive civil society participation in UN processes, though we realize that there is opposition to this participation within the member states. However, in order to have a UN centering human rights, we need the meaningful, effective and inclusive participation of civil society, that is based on institutionalized processes, which will not be dependent on the goodwill of member states.

WMG also recognizes the financial obstacles the UN is facing. The dependency this results in for the UN, and the further obstacles it creates for recognizing the ideals the UN was founded upon is very concerning, considering the current geopolitics mentioned above. However, the reliance of private sector, which does not have any real accountability mechanisms to answer to will only lead to further dependency for the United Nations.

Therefore, the consultation processes on the OAC are of critical importance to ensure the shortcomings of the report are addressed and it is transformed into a roadmap for a more fair, equal and just future the UN and We, the Peoples deserve.