

# WORLD: The UN unveils 6 themes in a big year pushing for women's rights

By Stéphanie Fillion

PassBlue (20.01.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2TJAani> – As the countdown to this year's main events celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women has begun, UN Women has announced six themes to anchor the two Generation Equality forums to be held in May and in July. While many women's groups applaud the broad themes, some have serious qualms about one topic in particular.

The Generation Equality Forum is a civil society-led global gathering, officially announced last June, that will play a major role in the Beijing+25 commemorations. They officially start with the annual Commission on the Status of Women, or CSW, in March at the United Nations, where a review of the progress and gaps of the 1995 Beijing agenda will be made to inform the two forums later in the year as well as a UN General Assembly session in September.

The new "action coalition" themes are: gender-based violence, economic justice and rights, bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive rights, feminist action for climate justice, technology innovation for gender equality and investing in feminist movements and leadership.

UN Women leads the Generation Equality forums with France and Mexico, where women-centered groups, “allied countries” and other partners will convene from May 7-8 in Mexico City and July 7-10 in Paris. Their goal is to further define the blueprint hammered out at the New York conference on how to achieve gender equality – especially for young women – by 2030.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted by 189 countries at a conference held in 1995 to achieve gender equality and women’s rights. Hillary Clinton, the United States first lady at the time, famously declared at the Beijing meeting, “human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights. . . . ”

Despite progress on some fronts, no country has achieved gender equality since that bold declaration. In the current political environment, growing nationalism and populism in certain countries, such as the US, pushback against ensuring full rights for women has been powered by the highest levels of governments.

“The themes for the action coalitions were finalized through a thorough analytical process of reviewing evidence and data to assess the nature of need, the degree of readiness and the action coalition’s ability to deliver game-changing results within five years,” said Julien Pellaux, the strategic planning adviser to the executive director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.

Each coalition will be led by a group of partners, including

UN member states, women's movements, civil society organizations and corporations as well as some UN agencies. The themes were chosen by a 52-member Generation Equality Strategic Planning and Leadership Group, formed by UN Women.

In addition, the coalitions will work on a plan toward the UN Decade of Action, which aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals.

This year is also an important marker for commemorating UN Security Council Resolution 1325, on women, peace and security, a 20-year-old landmark document ensuring women's rights in conflict. It has made scant progress in guaranteeing that women are equally represented at peace negotiations, to the disappointment of many women's groups.

While some themes chosen by UN Women echo traditional ones on gender issues, the one on technology innovation reflects more recent realities.

Technology holds significant potential to improve women's and girls' lives, Pellaux from UN Women told PassBlue. "The diverse ways in which technology is impacting on gender equality shows that rather than being an unstoppable force, technology is malleable and can be geared towards the achievement of social goals with the right interventions and levers.

"Interventions and investments should support technological development and innovation and ensure that technology serves

the purpose of advancing gender equality,” he said.

### ***‘Bodily autonomy’***

The reaction to the announcement of the themes has not been roundly praised. Some women’s groups around the world are dismayed about the process behind the choice of themes and the results, saying the decision-making has been dominated by Western organizations favoring decriminalization of prostitution.

In November, PassBlue published a story about UN Women having just declared its neutrality in the battle among global feminists over whether sex work should be decriminalized. At the time, a statement from Mlambo-Ngcuka, the head of UN Women, overruled a 2013 memo that the agency would “recognize the right of all sex workers to choose their work or leave it and to have access to other employment opportunities.”

The move to neutrality by UN Women, possibly to avoid fearsome squabbles on the topic during 2020 commemorations, seemed to surprise advocates of decriminalization.

“We are aware of the different positions and concerns on the issue of prostitution/sex work and are attentive to the important views of all concerned,” Mlambo-Ngcuka wrote in her statement. “UN Women has taken a neutral position on this issue. Thus, UN Women does not take a position for or against the decriminalization/legalization of prostitution/sex work.”

Mlambo-Ngcuka was responding to a letter she had received days earlier, signed by more than 1,400 individuals and organizations, who were concerned that UN Women was allowing civil society groups advocating for decriminalization of buyers and sellers of sex to influence future debates about women's equality and rights. Those debates included the Generation Equality forums and the Commission on the Status of Women meeting. Last week's announcement on the action themes, however, is keeping the debate around UN Women's neutrality alive.

Taina Bien-Aimé, the executive director of the New York-based Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, which opposes the legalization of prostitution/sex work, denounced the wording of the theme on "bodily integrity." She says it favors one side of the debate.

The letter sent to UN Women last fall was written by Bien-Aimé's organization. She is a former Wall Street lawyer and a founder of Equality Now.

"The concern is that," Bien-Aimé told PassBlue, "while respect for SRHR [sexual and reproductive health and rights] is key to all women's fundamental rights to health and equality, it has, incomprehensibly, become a vehicle to push to legalize the global multi-billion-dollar sex trade and redefine prostitution as labor."

Pellaux of UN Women said the wording of the themes "was kept general for now with the expectation that Coalition leaders

will have [to] further refine the titles as part of the Action Coalition blueprints.”

“This includes the coalition on ‘bodily integrity and sexual and reproductive health and rights,’ ” he said.