Title: Where is Gender in the SDGs? An Examination of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that fell furthest behind the target were goal 4, “Reduce Child Morality,” and goal 5, “Improve Maternal Health” (UNDP 2015). These two goals make up Maternal and Child (MCH), and it is evident that women is a key link in the MCH through pregnancy, child-birth, child-rearing and the gendered roles that they play. MDGs’ goals 4 and 5 were also related to goal 3, “Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women.” Thus, it is no surprise that Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include gender and MCH as key issues in “Leaving No One Behind.” These goals are reflected in SDGs goal 3 “Good Health and Well-Being: Ensure Healthy Lives and Promote Well-Being for All at All Ages,” and goal 5 “Gender Equality: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls.” Specific targets for children, women and girls for MCH, women/girls’ empowerment, and gender equality are included in these goals.

However, two years into the SDGs, it is not clear if MCH- or gender-related goals are on track. In fact, there are signs that many of the SDGs’ goals and in particular, those related to gender are off track (UN 2018). In this paper, we review the UN’s own account of the progress to date on gender related targets, and the voluntary national reviews (VNRs) that UN member states have produced since 2016. While VNRs are what the governments would like to publicize to the world in terms of their progress in achieving the SDGs, and thus lack an objective assessment, they are still important as basis for self-assessment of SDGs’ progress. The VNRs are presented at the High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF) each year at the UN headquarters in New York City. One-hundred-forty-eight VNRs have been reported between 2016 and 2018.

We examine all VNRs submitted with an emphasis on gender- and MCH-related goals and targets, in particular on SDGs' goals 3 and 5. We focus on three key questions on gender- and MCH-related goals in SDGs: (1) the status of implementation; (2) national/regional variations and underlying cause; and (3) policy recommendations.