Quality Assurance of Gender Equality Markers
Improving Accuracy & Consistency

Guidance Note
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1. Purpose

This document complements and expands on the UNDG's *Gender Equality Marker Guidance Note* (2013). Together with the *Guidance Note on Coding Definitions for Gender Equality Markers* (2018), this supplementary guide aims to support UN entities in applying their Gender Equality Markers (GEMs) in an optimal manner.

To improve the implementation of UN-SWAP 2.0 Performance Indicators 9 (on resource tracking) and 10 (on resource allocation), this guidance note seeks to encourage inter-agency knowledge-sharing and is being developed by the UN-SWAP Gender Marker Working Group of the Finance and Budget Network (FBN), which is chaired by UN Women.

2. Background: What is quality assurance and why is it needed?

Quality assurance guarantees the reliability, accuracy and consistency of GEMs. It seeks to ensure that scores are applied correctly and monitored transparently within broader accountability processes. The UNDG's *Gender Equality Marker Guidance Note* (2013) identifies common principles and standards to ensure that the various GEMs across the UN system are comparable, and contributes to increasing their overall quality and reliability.

Within the UNDG guidance note, Common Standard 8 is entirely dedicated to quality assurance processes. It states that: *"Each entity will develop a quality assurance plan to support consistent and robust gender equality marker reporting. This plan will include participation in peer review processes in order to contribute to quality control. Entities will agree to regular participation as both reviewers and to opening their own systems for review. This type of process can support greater harmonization, inter-agency learning and could contribute to identifying good practices in this area."[1]*

The need to increase quality control and assurance has been highlighted at inter-agency workshops and meetings, such as the gender marker training hosted by UNDP and UN Women in Geneva in June 2014. There, entities affirmed that quality assurance is critical to ensure the reliability of data, the consistency in application of codes and their alignment with corporate mandates, as well as to determine accountability and real impacts. A 2015 gender markers survey conducted by the UN-SWAP Gender Marker Working Group found that: "The GEM is currently a coding system often without standardized and institutionalized quality control to ensure a consistency and objectivity of the rating system across countries and regions". The survey showed that when the quality of GEMs are optimized, the benefits of having such markers and tracking resources for the advancement of gender equality will also increase. Having the initial GEM codes reviewed by a gender unit, for example, can strengthen project design.

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[1] UNDG (September 2013). [Gender Equality Marker Guidance Note](#).

To develop this guidance, current methodologies used by UN entities were analyzed against multiple conclusions, inputs and presentations made at GEM workshops, and interviews with stakeholders.

The next two sections will outline lessons learned around some of the obstacles and challenges that emerged when applying GEMs. This guidance note will also detail best practices for strengthening quality assurance, ensuring the accuracy of coding, and confirming the reliability of data produced by resource-tracking for gender equality.

3. Lessons learned and challenges ahead

Findings or observations based on GEMs have proven to be inaccurate at times and do not always offer a reliable reflection of entities' investments in gender equality. When attempting to obtain accurate coding and consistent data, certain challenges occur.

Some aspects are inherent to the coding process and can make quality assurance a challenge, such as confusion over definitions, 'miscoding' and 'overcoding'. However, this goes beyond score-assignment. Sometimes the markers are not monitored or adjusted as needed at later phases of a project or programme cycle. In other cases, the markers are not effectively integrated into existing reporting and financial planning systems and corporate mechanisms. As a result, quality control must address the coding process itself, as well as the broader context in which a gender marker is being applied, in order to minimize inconsistencies. For potential remedies to be successful, all entities should be made fully aware of quality assurance challenges in order to better identify and anticipate potential obstacles within their own organization.

The main obstacles, challenges and constraints to ensuring the consistency of GEM data within an entity, or when aggregating data across entities, have been pinpointed through a review of quality assurance methodologies currently in use, and from inter–agency lessons gleaned from workshops and meetings. These challenges include:

- Data being indicative rather than precise
- Codes being incorrectly assigned
- Insufficient capacity to apply GEMs
- GEMs applied as a "stand-alone" instrument
- Technical obstacles and restrictions
- Low prioritization of GEMs

  ➢ **Indicative data as a constraint**

When analyzing how the quality of GEMs can be optimized, constraints and limitations need to be considered from the beginning. GEMs will provide "indicative" data that allows trends and changes to be tracked over time and which can contribute to decisions on funding allocations. However, GEMs do not measure the quality of intended outcomes and do not provide precise statistics on actual investments or expenditures at this stage. This has an impact on expectations, which should remain realistic. Ensuring the quality of GEMs will not negatively affect their defined mission and potential.

➢ Incorrect assignment of codes

One of the biggest challenges for the quality of these markers is incorrect coding, which leads to inconsistency. Common coding mistakes are 'overcoding 'and 'miscoding':
- overcoding: initiatives are being coded at a higher level than they should be, based upon objective indicators.
- miscoding: initiatives are being assigned a wrong code, in certain cases initiatives are being coded automatically in an identical manner ('same-coding').

When programme managers are responsible for coding their own projects (and the relevant unit of analysis for a GEM) without any independent review, bias can occur. Generally, this self-assessment leads to a positive bias identified as overcoding. Often the GEM 3 or 2b (principal contribution) score is unjustifiably perceived as a "better" result than GEM 2 or 2a (significant contribution).

When finance officers assign codes without communicating with implementing officers or the gender focal point, a certain bias occurs. The tendency to score all projects at the same GEM-level can result, and codes can be wrongly assigned. Sometimes there can also be confusion over how to apply coding definitions, or the coding criteria may be identified as too general, leaving room for unintentional misinterpretation.

To optimize a marker and its reliability, it is important to know who is assigning the score and how this happens, in order to rectify possible inaccuracies and assess whether optimal capacities exist to enable accurate scoring. A guiding question in the development of quality assurance processes should be: Which process can help in interpreting definitions of codes correctly?

To achieve consistent and reliable coding practices, entities need to acknowledge these miscoding and overcoding dangers. However, one always needs to look at the mandate of an organization, and the role of gender equality within the theory of change of a project or programme. Certain entities will have gender equality explicitly defined in their mandate or strategic plans and this emphasis should be reflected in higher GEM scores. Entities also need to be aware of gaps and confusion that may exist between the language used in the programme document and the actual reality of the programme, which may be weaker. Too often, strong commitments to gender equality reflected in language are not supported by the actual programme design.

➢ Insufficient capacities

In many cases, insufficient gender expertise and experience in gender mainstreaming interferes with the accuracy of coding. A lack of common understanding of coding can lead to inconsistent results. Multiple entities report insufficient guidance on how to interpret coding definitions or criteria for the recommended 4-point scales of the GEM.

Differences in the level of staff understanding of gender mainstreaming and gender equality can also play a role. At the same time, it is important to code "what you see" and quality control steps should not require researching additional information or having exceptional gender expertise. This implies that project documents used to determine appropriate codes must clearly and explicitly explain gender equality results and include indicators in their results framework.

➢ **GEMs applied as a "stand-alone" instrument**

Another challenge to be aware of is that GEMs are often not adequately embedded in budget and accounting systems and not fully integrated in all planning, monitoring, accountability and reporting processes of a given UN entity. This constitutes a lost opportunity for quality assurance and impedes the marker's potential for successful use.

The lack of accountability in project appraisal or review processes potentially undermines GEMs. When there is no opportunity to check whether collected feedback is being incorporated, and whether the score is truly deserved, the marker can remain inaccurate. This example goes hand-in-hand with the danger of weak integration of the marker in institutional structures. Often the marker is only deemed relevant at the project formulation stage and is not further integrated in implementation, monitoring and evaluation cycles. Codes are not being corrected enough or sufficiently reported on, which limits the value of GEMs as a potential planning and programmatic tool.

➢ **Technical obstacles and restrictions**

Outdated Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems may not have the optimal ability to track specific gender-related expenditures. Moreover, such systems do not allow for a precise identification of gender equality allocations, which affects the quality of GEMs (if already in place) or the development of a gender marker system (if not yet in place). In certain cases, the systems do not correspond to the coding units of the marker. The marker might require that codes be assigned at the output level, for example, while the ERP system and directly available data are primarily linked to activities.

Some systems are not fully dynamic and inserted data are not easily accessible and manageable by all staff, in particular programme managers.

Another quality-related restriction is that the reality of gender mainstreaming cannot always be tracked correctly because the financial reporting system of gender-related objectives does not represent all resources allocated for activities contributing to gender equality and women's empowerment. Sometimes activities that are beneficial for gender mainstreaming are not integrated in the particular unit of coding, although they do affect the gender equality results of that unit.

➢ **Low prioritization**

A lack of awareness of the importance and benefits of GEMs, as well as insufficient support from senior management to successfully implement gender mainstreaming, can be major obstacles. This low prioritization of, and commitment to, the markers can be felt when insufficient financial and human resources are made available to implement GEMs successfully throughout the entity.

To guarantee accuracy of coding, understanding possible threats and challenges is helpful to better prepare the organization in responding to these. As recommended in the UNDG Guidance Note, most entities must develop "a plan" to ensure QA. In the next section we will look at successful elements to include in such a plan.

4. Quality assurance and gender markers: recommendations and tips

How can quality control and quality-assurance methodologies for GEMs be improved, and support to entities increased? When developing a quality assurance plan, the coding process itself—as well as other factors that directly or indirectly influence the quality and reliability of collected data—need to be addressed.

Recommendations listed below are based on successful experiences that addressed quality-related challenges and lessons learned. Inputs are analyzed within the agreed framework of suggested common standards and principles of the UNDG GEMs Guidance Note. Tips for improved internal assurance, as well as external reviews and possible measures, are elaborated upon. Working on quality assurance implies the construction of an optimal context for a gender marker mechanism through a combination of technical as well as organizational measures.

A selection of recommendations and tips that have proven successful are listed below:
- Invest in GEM know-how
- Develop well-integrated GEMs and institutionalized quality control
- Implement an action plan to guarantee GEM accuracy
- Promote GEMs and strengthen political will
- Agree on a protocol for roles and responsibilities

> ### ➤ Invest in GEM know-how: build capacities and provide tailored guidance and tools

Consistency of coding can only be ensured when a strong, common and correct understanding of the definitions of the markers and criteria of the coding are present.[2] Technical support and greater focus on capacity-building will increase the reliability of coding. Entities are strongly encouraged to invest in capacity-building around gender equality and gender mainstreaming, as well as to seek technical support on how to code correctly. Ideally, each entity should develop its own specific tailored guidance linked to its mandate and strategic plan. Such plans outline how to apply more general definitions within the organization with pre-established criteria and benchmarks for each of the four levels of the coding scale.

Ongoing and inter-agency training and capacity-building will be useful, given that gender marker coding can be interpreted in different ways. Staff should also be encouraged to learn from the coding process. Often the dynamics of that process, and its internal review, require multiple staff members (finance officers, programme managers, gender focal points) to be trained in the correct and harmonized application of the marker. Reflection and dialogue on coding, beyond 'ticking the box', or merely attempting to reach an internal allocation target, are beneficial and will improve the quality of the markers.

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[2] *The Guidance Note on Coding Definitions* (2017) is a helpful tool for entities.

TIPS	- Create a pool of expert trainers who can conduct inter-agency training on GEMs - Use practical tip-sheets and user-guides on "how to code" that clearly explain the standards associated with each GEM code ("what is expected for this rating"). - Promote available online resources on how to code. - Make gender marker training part of mandatory staff training and develop a capacity-development plan. - Invest in learning platforms for all staff and organize webinars to share good practices tailored to the organization. - Disseminate all GEM data and interpretations to all staff to increase awareness and skills.

> ### Develop "well-integrated" GEMs with institutionalized quality control

Integrating GEMs into entities' financial and reporting systems will ensure that marker data is not a static, "stand-alone" dimension. Rather, these markers will become accessible, dynamic inputs on investments in gender equality that are reliable and meaningful for planning and programming. When GEMs are coupled with accurate information and analysis about financial allocations for gender equality, and included in all reporting tools, they can be linked more easily to strategic planning exercises. GEMs allow entities' investments in gender equality in all areas to be measured. If needed, they also enable decisions to be re-directed in an evidence-based manner, so as to meet strategic goals on gender equality or agreed-upon targets. Technical optimization and increasing the user-friendliness of existing systems might be required to fully embed marker data throughout reporting and accountability mechanisms.

TIPS	- Institutionalize GEMs into ERP systems. This should improve scores on UN-SWAP performance indicators in resource-tracking and allocation. - Harmonize data entry in financial reporting systems with the unit of coding of the gender marker. For example, if the GEM is coding at the output level, the financial reporting system should also reflect data at that level and the GEM should be made a statistical field in the ERP. - Keep technical requirements as simple as possible and facilitate accessibility and transparency of all data by streamlining budget and programmatic requirements.

A well-integrated GEM also refers to the good practice of including marker data (and facilitating its possible re-assessment) in the entire life-cycle of programmes and projects. Multiple entities have shared their positive experiences with this, highlighting the benefits of such integration during the phases of appraisal or design (coding and budget planning), implementation (possible budget revision) and evaluation (expenditure tracking). For each of these phases, it is useful to verify the GEMs and possibly detect inaccuracies. No additional processes are required if quality control of the marker is institutionalized within existing monitoring and accountability tools and mechanisms. This integrated approach will also strengthen the impact of GEMs with assured quality as it can measure the impact of changes that were put into practice.

TIPS	• Make the assignment of GEMs a mandatory element of any project appraisal process. For non-programmatic initiatives and budgets, the same scales should be used as they also reflect the organization's investments in gender equality. • Optimize corporate Monitoring & Evaluation methodologies which can be catalyzing for GEM quality assurance. By integrating these markers in an entity's results-based management mechanisms, they will become planning, monitoring and reporting tools. • Invest in transparent, accessible and dynamic "real-time" GEM data throughout the programme and project cycles. • Make it easy and technically possible to adjust scores if needed. Correcting mistakes is inherent to quality assurance and should be encouraged.

> ➢ **Implement an action plan to ensure accuracy: establish a combination of verified self-assessment and external peer reviews and oversight**

Quality assurance goes hand-in-hand with having effective quality control mechanisms, which should be a combination of inherent quality-assurance and verification, as well as external oversight or peer reviews at the different stages of coded initiatives. While it remains crucial to validate and review the accuracy of the initial assigned code, a review throughout the programme cycle would do more to ensure optimal quality of the marker. There are many options and various centralized reviews have proven to be successful in implementing this combination. Some of the most recurring recommendations are listed below:

• **Optimize consistent scoring and increase adaptability for feedback, especially during self-assessments.**

TIPS	• Validate codes at the planning stage by double-checking inputs and promoting dialogue as quality-assurance between all actors involved (such as finance officers, programme managers and gender focal points). Embedding GEMs in all project document templates will help initiate this dialogue. • Stimulate peer review and feedback among project managers within the entity (or even between different entities).

• **Promote an evidence-based coding process to increase reliability.**

Carrying out a gender analysis is crucial, as it helps to determine and verify appropriate scores, and it should be integrated into the results framework. Evidence can also be checked or requested at all stages of the programme cycle. This evidence-based approach, aligned with clear coding definitions and criteria, is the best way to address the obstacles of overcoding and miscoding, as well as the challenges of self-assessment.

TIP	• Request a short justification of the assigned scores in relation to the established criteria and definitions. Being encouraged to write a short explanation will increase the consistency of coding and facilitate accountability.

- **Seek gender expertise when assigning the initial code and at later review stages.**

Although gender marker training throughout the entire organization is highly recommended, in some cases codes are assigned by finance officers who have not received any gender training. In such instances, reviews or spot checks from either an external gender unit, or in-house gender officers, would be beneficial.

TIP	• Feedback from gender officers can also be used to improve and adjust project design (and GEM score) and implementation as well as to increase expected gender equality results.

- **Validate and reassess the transparency of codes throughout the cycles.**

Make use of the full potential of financial reporting systems for data and trend analysis and automated check-ups. Give feedback on discrepancies (e.g. flagging unexpected pattern recognitions) and disseminate all summarized GEM data to all staff as training material.

TIPS	• Facilitate dynamic scores that can be changed during a project cycle. Transparent and easily accessible financial systems with 'live data' are the best guarantee of an efficient validation of GEMs. • Encourage budget units to review inputs on a regular basis. GEM codes can be reassessed to reflect actual expenditures during implementation or as a result of altered action since the planning stage.

- **Organize random assessments/spot checks.**

While the large volume of coded initiatives might not always allow for a thorough or manual review of each input, a random assessment by specialists of a sampling of initiatives will not only correct inaccuracies, but also encourage the best possible coding practices throughout the entire organization.

TIP	• Plan external random assessments to verify the GEM and include customized feedback so that this validation investment is also a learning opportunity for future coding.

- **Use complementary gender-related monitoring and evaluation reports or audit mechanisms.**

This will allow GEM codes assigned at the planning stage to be cross-checked and validated. It will equally strengthen the value of the markers as strategic planning tools.

TIPS	• Increase the visibility of gender marker scores in existing monitoring and evaluation instruments and accountability tools • Highlight their added value in easily tracking down investments in gender equality.

- **Invest in inter-entity learning and actively participate in peer-reviews.**

Plan an evaluation of the entity's gender marker system after some years of implementation. Then, if necessary, implement the evaluation's recommendations and lessons learned in order to revamp the system.

TIP	• Open GEM systems up to other entities for review and sharing of good practices and lessons learned. Certain entities have already set-up and benefitted from a peer review process and inter-entity exchanges and learning opportunities.

➢ **Promote the benefits of the marker and strengthen political will**

To improve the quality of gender markers, the strong commitment and investment of senior managers is imperative in building awareness and capacities related to gender equality. All staff should be encouraged to work on achieving gender equality results. Having an accurate and integrated marker is one crucial element to achieve this.

Increased importance and integrated visibility of the markers often encourage staff to increasingly consult on the assignment of accurate codes. By prioritizing GEMs and investing in their quality assurance, their benefits and potential are enhanced. This also allows for their transition from an indicative tool to being a valuable accountability mechanism and strategic planning tool that improves results related to gender equality.

TIPS	• Make the gender maker score more visible, for example on cover pages of project documents. • Use a transparent and reliable GEM system as selling point for donors: allowing them to see and verify how they are contributing to gender equality. • Invest in evidence-based and reliable GEMs.

➢ **Agree on a protocol for roles and responsibilities**

Each entity should have a clear division of labour that outlines roles and responsibilities related to the GEM system. The protocol should address: a) who will be assigning or reassessing codes and at what stage of the cycle; b) who can support the scoring process and review the codes; and c) how all these steps will take place within the programme cycle. Often, gender officers play a supporting role in the assigning process or during a later review. Having a formal protocol in place not only offers clarity for all staff members, but it also promotes consistency of the codes. There is no uniform division of labour that will perfectly match each entity's structure and internal processes, but there should always be a built-in review at different stages.

TIPS	• Establish a GEM quality assurance protocol but integrate the specific gender marker requirements and roles into the overall corporate criteria for quality assurance. • Discuss the functionality of protocols at UNDG meetings. Doing so at the regional level may keep workloads realistic.

Quality assurance is a continuous work-in-progress. Although there are certain prerequisites, it is also a matter of political will and institutional leadership to keep improving processes that have been developed and are being, or will be, implemented.

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Tip Sheet for GEM Quality Assurance

- ✓ *Create a plan with designated roles and sufficient resources.*
- ✓ *Build adequate capacities to master the coding and invest in gender equality knowledge and gender mainstreaming skills for all staff.*
- ✓ *Provide clearly defined codes and criteria linked to the four marker categories tailored to your UN entity.*
- ✓ *Combine internal-quality assurance with external review and oversight.*
- ✓ *Institutionalize GEMs within other accountability and evaluation mechanisms as well as planning and monitoring cycles (i.e. make GEMs a strategic planning tool).*
- ✓ *Use existing gender expertise in the organization and increase GEM knowledge and skills through dialogue, training and learning platforms (within or between entities).*
- ✓ *Increase the visibility of GEMs in corporate appraisal processes and documents.*
- ✓ *Integrate and harmonize the quality assurance process of the markers with and within corporate quality assurance processes.*
- ✓ *Sensitize staff about the importance of GEMs to help achieve gender equality results.*
- ✓ *Communicate about the benefits of GEMs for the organization, not just to tick the UN-SWAP box, but as reliable trend analysis tools that can improve planning and programming.*

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5. Background materials

- o UNDG (2013). *Gender Equality Marker Guidance Note*. (September)
- o UNDG (2013). *Financing for Gender Equality and Tracking Systems Background Note*.
- o Recent data on the use of gender markers generated under UN-SWAP reporting.
- o Multiple presentations made by UN entities at the gender equality marker workshops in Geneva (2014 & 2015).
- o Multiple presentations made by UN entities to the FBN Working Group in 2015 and the findings of the 2015 FBN survey.
- o Reports from the inter-agency gender marker training, co-hosted by UNDP and UN Women in Geneva in 2014, and the UN-SWAP inter-agency workshop on gender equality markers, co-hosted by UN Women and the WMO, in Geneva in 2015.
- o Presentations made by WFP and UNDP on quality assurance for the FBN working group on gender markers, 2016.
- o Lessons learned from the implementation of the IASC gender markers.
- o Interviews with GEM stakeholders from UNICEF, WFP, UNFPA and UNDP (May 2017)