

# Looking Back One Year After the Generation Equality Forum: Which posterity?

The Generation Equality Forum (GEF) was both unique and original as its format aimed at overcoming the institutional obstacles caused by the hostility of certain state actors towards women's rights. Within a proactive framework, it has allied with the private sector, states and governments, the UN system, civil society, and philanthropic organizations wishing to give international impetus in favour of gender equality in the world. The event mobilized 50,000 people in an online format, who witnessed \$40 billion worth of pledges made under the Global Acceleration Plan. A year later, we have chosen to take stock of its impact and the challenges to be addressed.

## GEF Hosts: Defenders of Equality or Mere Opportunists?

**As a cause, gender equality is commonly exploited** by institutions, politicians, and private enterprises. Distinguishing genuine political will to deliver transformative change from the hype or electoral opportunism requires an in-depth analysis of the promises made and their actions. How have France and Mexico, host countries of the GEF, followed up on their commitments to the feminist cause? Moreover, what conclusions can be drawn from their commitments? **While good intentions are present, actual progress remains slow-paced.**

Since the end of the GEF in France, Emmanuel Macron was re-elected as the President of the Republic and renewed his commitment to gender equality, which he announced as the main cause of his five-year term. Internationally, however, French foreign policy cannot yet be described as feminist.

France's approach is quite simplistic, as it excludes the fields of defence, security and trade policy. The feminization of the diplomatic corps is limited, and gender mainstreaming in policies and actions is not yet systematic. **At the national level, the well-being of women remains worrisome:** gender-based violence is still a reality, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) remain under attack and challenged despite the government's actions. Finally, professional and economic inequalities have been exacerbated since the start of the pandemic

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**Mexico, led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, displays questionable legitimacy.** The country is the only South American nation to have adopted a feminist foreign policy that focuses on parity, the fight against violence against women, and intersectionality. However, the contradictions of such a policy are visible. Despite taking leadership on the international and regional scenes - Mexico being a participant in the Latin American and Caribbean feminist meetings (EFLAC) - the country struggles to reduce systemic violence taking place on its territory; it is the country where the most femicides are committed per year (2020).

Generally speaking, one can observe a commitment to **maintaining the status quo**. That being said, the slogan "Act Now" of the GEF displays the desire for immediate change in the face of the growing risks of violence in the lives of women and girls and the threats to women's rights in several countries worldwide.

## Communication and the Visibility of the GEF: A New Gap Between States, Civil Society and the Private Sector?

The guiding principle of the GEF was to **represent a moment of (re)introduction to the agenda of policies in favour of gender equality**, 26 years after the Beijing Conference. One of the objectives of this event was also to continue, debates related to women's rights in the next five years. However, these conversations during the GEF, stopped before they even started, not even being revived by the host countries in their political and public speeches. How can such disengagement be explained? Apart from general statements on gender equality, there has been no mention of the GEF on the Elysée website and by the French and Mexican governments for several months.

The GEF's social networks are also seldom used. On its website, it is **difficult to find recent and updated information**.

This is also the case within the UN system, where the GEF was only mentioned during the 66th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2022.

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On the other hand, **the private sector, one of the drivers of the GEF, tends to inform stakeholders and make relevant data accessible**.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation makes much information about its methodology, policy and fundraising activities readily available relatively transparently. For instance, they develop gender equality guides and related documentation for corporations<sup>1</sup>.

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1. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, « Financials », <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/about/financials>

Philanthropic organisations such as Ford Foundation follow the same trend. The foundation has published a Q&A on its website where stakeholders can learn about the commitments made, their implementation, their scope and the associations at work<sup>2</sup>.

**Civil society also brings the GEF to life** and continues the discussions on the feminist agenda initiated during the Forum. For example, Young feminist Europe, champion of the coalition on feminist leadership, participated in the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, where the work done so far by the coalition and its partners was shown. For the occasion, the organization also held a side event open to the public on June 13th 2022.

**In France, the Collectif Générations Féministes continues to pressure on the government** by using the hashtag **“stop talking, start funding”**, launched during the Forum, to mobilize more public funds for gender equality and French feminist civil society. Civil society demands a “regular” dialogue with the institutions, beyond occasional meetings. However, it remains skeptical<sup>3</sup>.

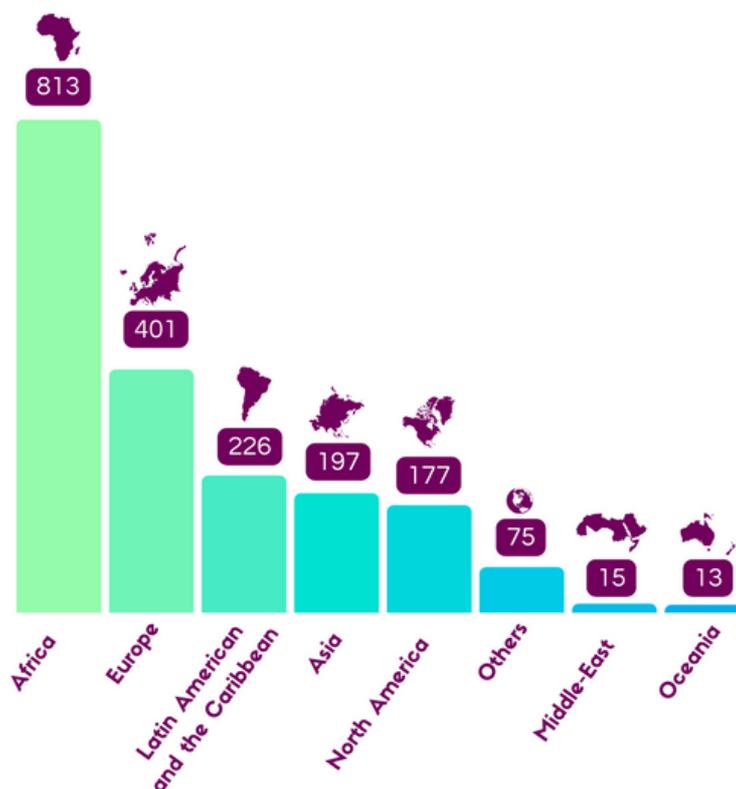
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2. Ford Foundation, «Q&A», <https://www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/news-and-press/news-additional-pages/faqs-generation-equality-forum-commitments/>

3. Sarah Aissaoui, Sofia Azaiez, Eugénie Boivin Jasinski, Silvia Costante and Juliette Stefano under the direction of Alice Apostoly and Déborah Rouach, “Le genre au sommet – Comprendre les enjeux du Forum Génération Égalité”, 01.12.2021, Institut du Genre en Géopolitique, <https://igg-geo.org/?p=5361>

## The Implementation of Commitments: Between Uncertainties, Achievements and Imbalances

Number of commitments made during the GEF by geographical area



<https://commitments.generationequality.org/dashboard/map/>

Thus, **a noticeable imbalance presents itself**: the governments of Arab countries and Oceania are somewhat absent, while the participation of Western and African countries is more common, followed by South American and Asian countries. **A two-tier type of involvement is visible**; on the one hand, the governments which respond to the call for international (re)mobilization for gender equality and others abstain from participating, although they are mainly represented, timidly, by their civil society. If the format of the GEF has enabled countries determined to advance the feminist cause, **the UN system remains very divided** in this direction, which risks slowing down, once again, progress in terms of equality and actions in this direction at the multilateral level.

**The international scene with regard to countries defending women's rights does not seem to have been affected following the holding of the GEF.** Gender equality-resistant states remain resistant.

Hungary, the Vatican, Russia and even Saudi Arabia continue to refrain from acting, and the women's rights within their territory have declined. The war in Ukraine and Ethiopia has caused an increase in gender-based violence by limiting women's access to essential services. The Taliban's newfound power in Afghanistan has resulted in the decline of women's rights, who are increasingly less present in the country's political and media spaces and whose autonomy and independence are threatened. The same phenomenon can be observed with respect to SRHR and the fight against violence against women. In the United States, more laws are being passed to limit access to abortion, and the endangerment of this right at the constitutional level raises fears of a real regression. After its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on March 20th 2021, Turkey regularly threatens several feminist associations with dissolution.

Despite this, the commitments made under the GEF have more than doubled compared to 2021: they went from 1,076 to 2,703, made by 1,007 commitment holders.

## **95 COALITION CHAMPIONS ARE IMPLEMENTING THEIR COMMITMENTS.**

**Several commitments made within the framework of the six action coalitions have moved forward.** Examples include the Canadian feminist recovery plan and the Global Alliance for care, Spain's partnership with UNFPA's We decide program against gender-based violence against people with disabilities. Part of the funds pledged by France for SRHR has been disbursed. They will be dedicated to the distribution of contraceptives through UNFPA and collaborations with the Organization for Dialogue in favour of Safe Abortion (ODAS) in West and Central Africa, as well as the Shaping Equitable initiative Market Access for Reproductive Health (SEMA).

**Some coalitions are more sustainable due to commitments and funding.** This is the case for coalitions on gender-based violence (805 commitments), economic justice and rights (531), feminist leadership (482) and SRHR (398). On the contrary, as observed last year by the IGG, coalitions addressing technological innovation and gender equality and climate justice, despite the growing importance of the digital sector and the fight against climate change, receive less support.

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A total of 95 coalition champions are implementing their commitments. However, the lack of an accountability mechanism complicates the task: without it, how can we concretely monitor what commitments have actually been met?

On the occasion of the 66th Commission on the Status of Women, on March 17th 2022, the Executive Director of UN Women, Sima Sami Bahous, presented an update of the table of commitments made by the action coalition, available online. However, it is not yet possible to know the amount allocated to each action coalition or which geographical area has made the most commitments. **This lack of information confirms the lack of transparency and the challenge of setting up an accountability framework.**

## What About Accountability Structures and Mechanisms?

Postponed to September 2021 and then again to a later date, this presentation falls short of the promises made to the GEF. It is **supposed to be presented in September 2022 at the United Nations General Assembly**, but very little is known about its characteristics yet. Admittedly, international institutions are dealing with heavy international relations-related news, but this isn't new. Are essential players in the implementation of the Acceleration Plan missing? Are others blocking the process?

**The design of such a tool**, given the number of commitments made and actors involved, **is undoubtedly one of considerable complexity**. Yet, UN models exist and civil society actors have detailed their wishes and recommendations for developing a legitimate and effective accountability plan. In July 2021 and April 2022, multi-stakeholder meetings took place to determine the main principles that should govern the mechanism. However they mainly lead to vague and general considerations without any real progress or precise information.

Have government alternations hostile to gender equality in certain states been able to jeopardize the planned timetable? Countries such as Ecuador and South Korea have recently seen a conservative government come to power, whose ideology is historically, and in essence, antagonistic to feminist demands. At the same time, **new countries on the fringes of the GEF, reaffirmed their desire to launch a feminist foreign policy**<sup>4</sup>, like Spain. Chile has also integrated a feminist perspective into its diplomacy after the December 2021 elections.

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4. In 2021, in Japan: the right remained in power. In Germany, the arrival of Scholz marks the end of the Merkel era. Countries like Peru, Chile and Honduras have seen the left come to power. Elections 'without real choice' have also taken place in Iran, Vietnam, Syria, Russia.

## Non-Permanent Accountability Structures: Urgent Times, Yet A Long Road Ahead

**The principles of the accountability mechanism should have been defined before the Forum.** Thus, each actor could have engaged in an informed manner, while being aware of all the constraints imposed. However, it appears that the fleeting nature of accountability would probably have dissuaded actors from participating in the Forum. The GEF wanted to be as integrative and universal as possible in order to launch a general framework. But, **along with fewer actors also comes fewer commitments,** thus jeopardising the transformative impact of the Forum. In terms of gender equality, during an interview with the IGG in February 2022 Delphine O, secretary-general of the GEF, when talking about long-term work stated: "we started from two states, France and Mexico, basically there was no other State that was acquired for the Forum. (...) in times of pandemic, it was extremely difficult to attract the attention of governments (...) who were completely overwhelmed by the health crisis (...) the idea is always to be able to recruit other coalition members". However, **time is running out,** as the <sup>5</sup> health, social, economic and humanitarian situation of women has significantly deteriorated since 2021. UN Women does not have the power to coerce the UN Member States and States cannot compel private corporations, foundations and the organizations involved.

Thus, **in the absence of incentives, communication, media and diplomatic pressure as well as an accountability plan, the future of the GEF is purely utopian.** If the entire legacy of the Forum were to depend solely on the will of States, there is much to fear with regard to women's future.

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5. [Interview] Inside the Generation Equality Forum, with Delphine O, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6tx9t8OgHtETeFWK4uOIAS?si=baa3134766eb42d5>

## Recommendations

**1 Develop a communication strategy within the GEF to guarantee its sustainability:** the stated aim of the GEF was to (re)mobilize the international community on gender equality issues, not only during the three-day forum but also and above all in the next five years. Ensuring continuous visibility of the GEF is necessary to garner the interest and participation of all stakeholders, hence the need to deploy a relevant communication strategy, in particular on the part of host States.

**2 Provide an inclusive, evaluative and monitoring accountability mechanism for the commitments adopted:** introducing an accountability mechanism is essential to guarantee compliance with the commitments formulated and their evaluation. First, we must consider creating a space for dialogue and information sharing in which the bearers of commitments can discuss, communicate and explain the objectives of their actions, and answer any doubts or questions. It should also be possible to introduce control procedures in order to evaluate, with complete transparency, the commitments made or to call them into question if inconsistencies are observed.

**3 Ensure the reliability of data on the GEF and update existing platforms:** Accessibility and the production of data are crucial to assessing the impact of the GEF and understanding its effects and objectives. The absence of a geographical charter makes it difficult to develop a global vision of the countries and the types of actors who have made commitments. It would be useful to update the GEF website, introduce keyword search parameters, classify the commitments in alphabetical order and offer at least a first overview, albeit provisional, of the implementation of the financial commitments made.

**4 Systematically have the objectives of the Acceleration Plan in favour of women's rights on the international agenda,** take advantage of the opportunities for the presidency of the French European Union and the Mexican appointment to the non-permanent members of the Security Council of United Nations to focus on the plan and its implementation. These moments of visibility of the host countries would make it possible to draw attention to the GEF and its impact and to highlight the acceleration plan both within the framework of the European Union and in the United Nations system.

**5 (Re)create the MEAE unit in charge of monitoring the GEF:** the presence of an ad hoc unit for monitoring the GEF is a fundamental tool as it enables the supervision of the commitments that have been made, the interactions with the partners of the Forum and the actions taken or to be taken.

**6 Prioritize programs and measures in favour of gender equality within government actions:** Governments need to quantify, clarify and act in a transparent and accessible way, and to draw inspiration from good practices if necessary. The increased participation of States in the fight for gender equality is essential in achieving stable and structural results. It is certainly necessary to consider partnerships and discussions with feminist civil society and the private sector to advance women's cause, without placing the sole responsibility on these actors to pursue the ambitious commitments of the GEF.

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