EQUITY-FOCUSED AND GENDER-RESPONSIVE EVALUATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:
AN EVOLVING PRACTICE IN REPORTING VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS
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Produced by:

Meredith Barkey
Melissa Lo
Nozomi Shirakawa
Rachel Thibeault
Liliane Umuhoza

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Since the launch of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, countries have committed to presenting their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) at the High-level Political Forum to demonstrate their progress in implementing the SDGs.

The core principles of the 2030 Agenda are human rights, gender equality and a commitment to leave no one behind. As part of the research effort that the EvalGender+ and EvalSDGs networks initiated, four countries in Latin America—Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica and Suriname—were selected for a review on their VNRs. These reviews examined whether equity-focused and gender-responsive evaluative evidence has been integrated into the VNRs and the extent to which these states have integrated gender equality and equity into their national policies and systems.

This report highlights the main results of the review of the 2022 VNRs conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean and suggests recommendations for enhanced integration of equity-focused and gender-responsive evaluative evidence in implementing the SDGs and preparing VNRs.
The review covers a sample of four VNRs from 2022 in Latin America and the Caribbean. The selection of the sampled VNRs took into account the language in which they were presented, as the reviewing group had a limited understanding of Spanish and Portuguese languages. The sampled VNRs covered the Latin America and Caribbean region and included the following countries:
The criteria for this review builds on a previously developed framework by the EvalGender+ and UN Women to guide the annual review of VNRs. For this 2022 review, evidence was analyzed on the use of equity-focused and gender-responsive evaluation in the VNRs and the integration of gender equality and equity into national policies and systems. The framework examined eight domains:

**Keyword:**
This domain examined the extent to which specific words were used in VNRs, such as evaluation, assessment, monitoring, review, follow-up, impact, gender, gender-sensitive, gender-transformative, sex-disaggregated data, logical framework, evaluation matrix, sexuality, inclusion, disability, refugees, violence, abuse, gender equity, gender-inequality, gender-analysis, marginalized, rural, women, female, men, boys, youth and elderly.

**Governance:**
This domain reviewed whether VNRs clearly explained how the assessment of SDG implementation had been managed; whether a high-level body in the country had been assigned to supervise implementation of the SDGs; the nature of this responsibility; and what monitoring and evaluation frameworks and practices were adopted by these bodies to manage SDG implementation. This section also studied whether national women’s machineries had participated in consultations on preparing the VNRs.

**Methods:**
This domain reviewed evidence of methodological framework usage when assessing SDG implementation. It examined the extent to which the VNRs integrated elements of gender-responsive assessments (gender-specific objectives, using sex-disaggregated data for all SDGs, some or just SDG 5 (Gender Equality)). This section also assessed the extent to which VNRs provided evidence on whether countries are integrating gender equality issues into national monitoring and evaluation (M&E) policies and systems and whether the use of evaluation is referenced in these systems.

**Evaluation:**
This domain examined the extent to which countries considered the role of evaluation and use evaluation and gender-responsive evaluative evidence in managing the SDGs and preparing VNRs, and their use and incorporation of such evidence. It also looked at whether VNRs highlighted the best performing SDGs and whether progress on SDG 5 (Gender Equality) was included. In addition, this section studied whether Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs) and other bodies (i.e. statistics institutes, universities, and research institutions) were part of VNR preparation process.
National gender frameworks:
This domain looked at whether VNRs referred to international frameworks or policies related to gender, such as CEDAW. It also examined evidence of countries developing and activating national gender equality strategies and priorities. In addition, it examined the extent to which countries integrated gender-equality issues and the needs of vulnerable groups into national plans, and demonstrated examples of the positive impact such policies have in support of gender equity.

Leave no one behind:
This domain examined the extent to which VNRs demonstrated evidence of the leave no one behind principle, including considering the perspective of marginalized voices and the efforts made to ensure that all national policies, plans and programmes reached the most marginalized and left no one behind.

Looking ahead:
This domain assessed whether VNRs demonstrated future plans for the regular review of SDG implementation progress at the national level. This domain also examined recommendations on how evaluative evidence for gender-equality and -equity considerations could be strengthened in future reviews.

Overall summary:
The review criteria concluded with an overall summary domain that highlighted the main findings and observations of Latin American and Caribbean countries, with comments on the VNR structure.
Specific findings across the different domains of the review are outlined on following pages.

Overall, four countries referenced SDGs in their VNRs and demonstrated their intention of meeting these goals. However, none fully reported those SDGs that were the theme-focus of the High-level Political Forum for 2022, while providing a general overview of the remaining SDGs. The theme-focused SDGs this year were Goal 4 Quality Education, Goal 5 Gender Equality, Goal 14 Life Below Water, Goal 15 Life on Land, and Goal 17 Partnerships for the Goals. The High-level Political Forum theme for 2022 was "building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." While countries cited adverse impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, specific policies to ‘build back better’ from the pandemic or advancing the full implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were not present.

In general, the review of 2022 VNRs showed that despite the effort to increase focus on gender-related policies at the national level, there is still a need to implement specific, concrete and measurable policies and programs, increase access to sex-disaggregated data; as well as the employment of intersectionality lens by consulting with women in local communities and integrating marginalized communities such as the LGBTQI+ communities.
Focusing on language usage, it appears all states are committed to establishing a strong framework for M&E of the SDGs, and incorporating gender-inclusive approaches in the implementation of their goals. Dominica and Jamaica focused heavily on gender equality and gendered impacts; but there is less acknowledgment of LGBTQI+, no mention of patriarchy, and few mentions of sexual violence in Suriname and Dominica.

Though they both show commitment to M&E of the SDGs, Suriname and Grenada showed a need to establish mechanisms and clear plans for action. Generally, M&E, gender, women, youth, and disability were mentioned by most countries, but gender analysis, stereotypes, minorities, sexual orientation, refugees, and patriarchy were scarcely mentioned.

**Dominica:** Displays commitment to monitoring and evaluation, as well as gender equity issues relating to women and women’s empowerment, but no mention of the LGBTQI+ community.

**Grenada:** Commitment to M&E of the SDGs, but there is a lack of established mechanisms; significant mentions of gender and women, but little to no mentions of gender inequality and LGBTQI+.

**Jamaica:** Focus on M&E and gender equality, however, no acknowledgment of the LGBTQI+ community or patriarchy.

**Suriname:** Committed to robust M&E mechanisms, but no mentions of the LGBTQI+ community and very few mentions of gender equality/equity, sexual violence, and women empowerment.
GOVERNANCE

As shown within the VNRs, all states demonstrated a concerted effort to monitor the implementation of SDGs into their national frameworks, by employing national performance M&E systems. The VNRs showed that progress has been made within governance and that each state has proposed an expected timeline for self-accountability. However, consultation with National Women’s machineries regarding these processes was significantly less present, with 2 out of the four states assessed as ‘unclear’.

Dominica: Dominica is still in the process of developing formal mechanisms and databases for effective M&E of its SDGs. The central body to coordinate the implementation and evaluation of the SDGs lies with the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, Climate Resilience, Sustainable Development, and Renewable Energy.

Jamaica: Jamaica’s VNR report included multiple timelines and ‘roadmap’ elements proposing a route of action for aligning their national policy with the SDGs, and are well on their way. However, the VNR itself recognizes room for improvement, especially in establishing lasting and specific governmental mechanisms.

Grenada: Includes progress on aligning national policies to the SDG goals through its National Sustainable Development Plan. M&E mechanisms are still in their beginning stages. However, Grenada acknowledges its shortcomings and remains committed to establishing appropriate mechanisms.

Suriname: The VNR focused on 4 SDGs: Quality Education, Decent Work, Economic Growth, Climate Action, and Partnership for the Goals. The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Foreign Affairs are responsible, in collaboration with the National SDG committee, and civil societies established by the government.

METHODS

The VNRs indicated that all states’ M&E systems include at least some elements being looked for within the methodological assessment, but were limited by the actual capacity of such systems. For example, evaluating Suriname’s M&E system is difficult because the VNR report only discusses four SDGs, while Dominica’s system is heavily reliant on government agencies and Ministries, limiting their perceived scope. Conversely, Jamaica and Grenada both admitted a need for improvement in the future, lacking extensive M&E systems and failing to mention them in-depth within their report.


Jamaica: Jamaica mentions M&E frameworks, but not how they relate to specific sections or issues. Rather, it is mentioned within the outline of their plan, and very little elsewhere.

Grenada: Does not report any established methodological frameworks used to assess the SDG implementation process. Grenada has committed to establishing frameworks moving forward.

Suriname: M&E is key for Suriname to evaluate and implement both national and SDGs goals. However, the report did not show a clear framework and methodologies to use in the M&E to assess SDGs.
EVALUATION

The VNRs indicated that Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation were absent in all states’ efforts. All VNRs mention monitoring and evaluation, but only some describe efforts to incorporate gender-responsive evaluative evidence. Various reports failed to show that the role of evaluation in M&E frameworks was significantly considered in preparing for the SDG review, and as a result, many have highlighted the need for stronger monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

**Dominica**: Does not discuss the significance of evaluation in-depth, nor mention gender-responsive evaluation processes. Dominica does, however, acknowledge strategies for improving M&E processes for the future.

**Grenada**: The role of evaluation in M&E frameworks are not significantly considered in the VNR.

**Jamaica**: Mentions evaluation methods and strategies consistently throughout its report but in a more general sense, and only includes SDG 5 within its respective section rather than weaving it into other areas/issues/strategies.

**Suriname**: Institutions to help monitor and evaluate the SDGs have been established by the Suriname government. However, they lack professional M&E and the mechanism and methodologies of the M&E processes are not clear.

**KEY INDICATOR**

NATIONAL GENDER FRAMEWORKS

The VNRs indicated that for all states, equity-focused and gender-responsive evidence were not strongly present nor prioritized. The VNRs heavily referenced national strategies and policies, however provided little to no data as evidence to support claims being made.

**Dominica**: Mentions the implementation of five different national gender equality strategies which align with various SDGs. However, there is a lack of data to support the achievement of these targets.

**Grenada**: has set National Gender Equality strategies and/or priorities that align with existing SDG goals, however, information in the VNR report is overall generalized.

**Jamaica**: Many strategies, frameworks and policies; however, no actual evidence of improvement to back up the effectiveness.

**Suriname**: Gender policies are very generalized, goal 5 is absent; those that are available cover goal 3, 8 and 13.
Each state mentions Leave No One Behind (LNOB) initiatives and identifies regionally-specific marginalized groups. A few recurrent themes are found throughout these VNRs – first, while states do identify and consider some vulnerable groups within their strategies to achieve the SDGs, marginalized perspectives are overwhelmingly absent from each respective report. As a result, it is unclear to what extent certain vulnerable groups have been consulted. Moreover, some vulnerable groups – especially the LGBTQI+ community – are absent from the VNRs. Overall, more action is needed to incorporate vulnerable and marginalized perspectives into policy strategies for achieving the SDGs.

**Dominica:** Includes significant gender-responsive policies that aim to promote gender equity and the socioeconomic well-being of vulnerable groups across economic and climate-resiliency sectors. However, some identified vulnerable groups (such as LGBTQI+ and homeless people) are mentioned only once in the report.

**Grenada:** Evidence of LNOB initiatives and the identification of Grenada’s most vulnerable peoples are limited; there is a greater need for the consideration of marginalized perspectives within future VNRs. Grenada does promote access to education and vocational training in an effort to leave no one behind.

**Jamaica:** Considers and mentions marginalized groups, but fails to incorporate the perspectives of these groups into the VNR. Moreover, Jamaica maintains a focus on heterosexuality with regard to the spread of HIV, and refers to homosexual men as “men who have sex with men.” Mentions of religious minorities and LGBTQI+ communities are absent.

**Suriname:** Suriname fails to incorporate marginalized perspectives within its VNR, but does identify key vulnerable groups and investment plans for social protection programs and the education system. While Suriname is committed to policies that will improve inclusivity for marginalized communities, it fails to outline specific goals or a methodological approach.
Overall, each country includes general plans to complete annual assessments of the progress toward SDG implementation at the national level. Two limitations were found to be overwhelmingly present:

(1) either the absence of or a lack of specificity towards including evaluative evidence to strengthen gender equality and equity considerations in future annual reviews, and;
(2) a need for greater financial and human resources in order to complete necessary assessments or empowerment of marginalized groups.

While all countries demonstrate plans to complete annual assessments, and some mention gender-responsive assessments, there is a greater need for specificity on the methodologies for improving evaluative evidence for gender equality and equity considerations.

Dominica: Explicitly mentions the key goal of establishing a national assessment; the Ministry of Planning, Economic Development, Climate Resilience, Sustainable Development and Renewable Energy remain main coordinators of all SDG M&E processes. Provide some strategies to strengthen evaluative evidence for gender equality & equity, but more specific metrics to enhance monitoring and capacity are absent.

Grenada: Commits to the implementation of the SDGs through its National Sustainable Development Plan (2020 - 2035) and to complete annual assessments. The need for greater funding and human resources to achieve gender equality and women empowerment goals is addressed in its VNR. However, Grenada falls short of providing specifications that would directly address this issue.

Jamaica: The annual assessment of SDG progress will be undertaken through 2030 Vision Jamaica, which will align the performance measurement framework of the SDGS using targets and indicators with the strategic priorities of its Medium Term Socio-Economic Policy Framework. Includes gender-responsive budgeting and considerations with no listed strong or concrete recommendations.

Suriname: Does not mention annual/regular assessments, but mentions there will be assessments for national and SDG goals. The assessment and policies discussed will be inclusive, and take into consideration the promotion of gender, people with disabilities, low-income families, and other marginalized communities. The limitation is that it only focus on Goals 4, 8, 13 and 17 only.
MAIN CHALLENGES

Similar to the VNR reviews for 2018-2021, the 2022 VNRs suggested two primary challenges in monitoring the progress of the SDGs. First is the infrequent use of country-led evaluation to inform planning and managing implementation of the SDGs. Second is the unavailability of sex-disaggregated data to provide nuanced information on SDG progress.

Country-led evaluations
The VNRs lacked specificity in their policies and programs. There was little evidence of the effects of the policies and/or programs, and their objectives lacked measurable and actionable policies and/or interventions.

It is clear when reading the VNRs that each country's approach is very top-down, failing to fully include affected communities and organizations which could lead to a more effective and nuanced approach such as minority communities, women’s organizations, or Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation.

All four states lacked sufficient inclusion of marginalized perspectives within each respective VNR and lacked sufficient acknowledgment and inclusion of LGBTQI+ communities within SDG achievement strategies.

Access to sex-disaggregated data
Acknowledging that Dominica, Grenada, and Suriname conducted their first VNRs in 2022, a portion of the reports shed light on the lack of human resources, access to disaggregated data, and national funding. Rather than identifying specific metrics and improvements for evaluation moving forwards, the VNRs lacked specific policy action.

Adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic
Recognizing that COVID had an adverse and severe impact on the respective states, the VNRs at times showed a propensity for using COVID as a way to avoid accountability after having failed to meet preset standards or goals.
CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the 2022 VNR review, this analysis highlights the following conclusions:

**HIGHLIGHT 1**
There is a commitment to establishing a strong framework for monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs, and incorporating gender-inclusive approaches in the implementation of their goals; however, there is a lack of acknowledgement of LGBTQI+ and patriarchy.

**HIGHLIGHT 2**
All states demonstrated the implementation of SDGs into their national policies using national performance M&E mechanisms and specified timelines of action.

**HIGHLIGHT 3**
Access to disaggregated data by sex and other variables such as age and disability to monitor the SDGs continues to be challenging. Gender, education and health targets are often the only data disaggregated by sex.

**HIGHLIGHT 4**
The engagement of women machineries in preparing VNRs was generally unclear; however, there seems to be a general improvement in this area from previous years.

**HIGHLIGHT 5**
The engagement of Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation is still a major challenge – these organizations were almost absent in preparing the VNRs and supervising implementation of the SDGs.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this review of the 2022 VNRs, the following recommendations are proposed for a more robust demonstration of the use of equity-focused and gender-responsive evaluative evidence in implementing the SDGs and preparing VNRs.

01 — Standardize metrics
VNR participants should include specific and standardized metrics to measure progress on the achievement of SDGs

02 — Collaboration with the UN
The United Nations should collaborate with participating states in order to assess and provide the funding needed to facilitate effective monitoring and evaluation processes.

03 — Accountability & Inclusion
Hold states accountable to include marginalized communities’ perspectives in a separate section; require an intersectional analysis that includes social norms, historical legacies, and cultural heritage, plus disabilities, gender, sex, racial/ethnic class and socioeconomic conditions.

04 — Going Little by Little
Acknowledge the slow process of marginal change when creating lasting improvements (a concept that has only been vindicated in OECD countries)

05 — Task force
UN women to use grants to help finance a task force for establishing gender-focused statistical monitoring teams, including local, grassroots-level women’s groups