

To:

Sima Sami Bahous, UN Women Executive Director,

Åsa Regnér, UN Women Deputy Executive Director for Policy, Programme, Civil Society and Intergovernmental Support;

Anita Bhatia, Deputy Executive Director for UN Coordination, Partnerships, Resources and Sustainability

Subject: UN Women's MoU with BlackRock

Dear Ms Bahous, Ms Regnér, Ms Bhatia,

We write to you on behalf of the undersigned feminist organizations, networks, constituencies and individuals, all of which are committed to ensuring that the United Nations delivers on international agreements on gender equality, SDG 5 and women's human rights. We are dismayed to hear that on May 25th, 2022, UN Women announced that it signed a [Memorandum of Understanding with BlackRock, Inc.](#) "to cooperate in promoting the growth of gender lens investing"¹. The declaration is dissonant, in view of BlackRock's well-known record of prioritizing profits over human rights or environmental integrity, to a degree that meets precisely the Secretary-General's [characterization](#) of 'morally bankrupt' global finance institutions as being amongst the chief threats to human equality and planetary integrity. Gendered historical and structural inequalities ensure that women and people who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination are the ones who suffer the harshest consequences of the social, economic, ecological and political impact of the work of asset management firms that concentrate the world's wealth into investments in fossil fuels, military and civilian weapons, and sovereign debt. In a time of climate, environmental, health, political and economic crises, a partnership with an entity that is actively undermining international commitments to advance sustainable development, is a serious aberration. It departs from the human rights principles of the UN, from the SDG priorities of building equality, peace, and sustainable development, and from UN Women's mandate to promote gender equality.

Civil society watchdog groups consistently identify BlackRock as among the [worst performers](#) on corporate accountability. Its climate and socially-destructive investments — particularly significant in impact because of the massive component they represent of BlackRock's portfolio — [have been called out by activists](#). Aware of the optics, BlackRock has attempted to 'greenwash' itself by acknowledging the seriousness of climate change — in a move that the New York Times [has condemned](#) as 'climate hypocrisy' that is intentionally misleading; worse than climate denial.

The recently-announced partnership with UN Women suggests that UN Women has been recruited to BlackRock's image-cleansing efforts – this time it is seeking to 'pinkwash' itself. It is hard to reach any other conclusion from the May 25 [press release](#). A joint interest in 'gender lens investment' is offered to explain the partnership with no explanation of what this means, nor why BlackRock is the best interlocutor for this effort, nor whether it would require BlackRock to divest from the many industries it supports that exacerbate gender inequality (through, for instance, gendered job segregation and segmentation, gendered pay gaps, let alone gender-specific impacts of small arms proliferation and ecological destruction). If this is a 'partnership', it looks like it works in just one direction. It gives BlackRock a veneer of feminist approval that it clearly does not merit. Given BlackRock's phenomenal size and influence (reportedly [managing ten trillion USD](#)) in assets, it is not unreasonable to assert that this UN Women partnership also gives a feminist imprimatur to the version of neoliberal global capitalism that is condemned by the SG. This crisis-prone speculation-based capitalism, spawning grotesque income inequalities, has also been linked to [misogynistic neo-populism and entrenched poverty](#) for many women, particularly those from ethnic or racial minorities, marginalized sexualities, and female-headed households.

To substantiate our concerns, we list here just a few examples of BlackRock practices of extreme concern that directly contractive feminist social and economic change agendas:

Fossil fuels

In 2021, contradicting [declarations](#) that BlackRock would divest from fossil fuels (it is one of the world's [biggest investors in the world's dirtiest](#) fossil fuel companies), it put \$85bn of assets managed into coal companies, including those seeking to identify and [exploit new coal assets](#), [breaching the decisive climate action](#) required by the Paris Agreement. The Working Group III report, "Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change" by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, released on 4 April 2022, highlighted the need for a dramatic shift away from fossil-fuels, gas and coal-based economies. Just one month later, UN Women's partnership with BlackRock was announced, with no reference to BlackRock's massive fossil fuel portfolio, nor of the differentiated impacts the environmental crises have on the human rights of women and other marginalized groups who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

In a wider manner, BlackRock also invests in projects that are harmful to environmental integrity as a whole. For instance, BlackRock is a major investor in deforestation projects, destroying the tropical rainforests to invest in palm oil plantations in [Papua New Guinea](#), while human rights abuses have been documented in parallel.

External private debt

BlackRock is the leading known holder of external private debt in the global South. [In Zambia, it is the largest private bondholder](#), but it refused a request by Zambia to suspend debt payments in 2020 and has not offered to restructure the debt. BlackRock's holdings of Zambia's bonds were \$220 million as of February 2022, over half of which were purchased during the high stress first 18 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It could make a 110% profit on this debt, if it is fully paid. Meanwhile, cuts planned by the government of Zambia in 2022–26 are equivalent to [five times its annual health budget](#), putting women and other marginalized groups at risk as they depend on public health services and also form a large portion of frontline health workers.

Private creditors such as Blackrock and Ashmore [hold 47% of Sri Lanka's debt](#) via bonds that were issued post Sri Lanka's civil war; the bondholder, [Hamilton Reserve Bank, has sued Sri Lanka](#) in the state of New York for the full payment of principal and interest, as it considers that the recent debt default has been orchestrated by the government. New York State's legislature recently passed [a bill](#) to ensure that private creditors can't use courts to get better settlements than bilateral government creditors. Blackrock is now part of a bondholder group that is [negotiating a restructuring](#) with the Sri Lankan government. Sri Lanka is currently in a severe crisis, with [food shortages](#) and fuel rationing, both of which impact women and girls disproportionately, with women and other marginalized groups experiencing [job losses](#) first. This takes place in a context where male household members' food and health needs tend to be prioritized, while [care and domestic work burdens increase](#).

Labor rights

BlackRock has voted against every single shareholder resolution relating to labor rights where it has shareholdings, including resolutions relating to corporate accountability for sexual harassment and closing the [gender pay gap](#) as well as against 47% of climate resolutions. In contrast, it has voted for every resolution that the Committee for Workers Capital (the global committee representing workers interests in pension funds), has advised voting against. BlackRock has investments [where child labour](#) has been exposed.

Militarization

Through its investment strategies, BlackRock is also a major supporter of the military industrial complex. It has major investments with civilian gun manufacturers such as Smith and Wesson and Sturm, Ruger, & Company (which produces the Ruger mini-semi automatic 14 rifle among other weapons). It has holdings in Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics, Raytheon, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman (these are identified by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) as among the [largest weapons sales companies globally](#)), Axon (which produces tasers), and Elbit (which provides logistical support for weapons delivery). High level executives in BlackRock serve on the [corporate boards of various military suppliers](#) and vice versa. These investments build a gruesome connection between BlackRock and wartime violence and displacement, which have severe and highly

gendered consequences, as well as with civilian gun deaths and the militarization of the police.

UN Women's mandate includes a focus on "building sustainable peace" and working to [prevent armed conflicts](#), as well as a central concern with ending the global pandemic of violence against women, violence that is significantly amplified by small arms proliferation. For UN Women to partner with a corporation that is so extensively involved in profiting from militarism seems contradictory at best, and potentially highly damaging to its credibility in the Women Peace and Security arena.

Moving forward:

Rescind the BlackRock partnership, set standards for future private sector partnerships, involve feminist civil society in UN Women governance

The partnership between BlackRock and UN Women presents serious and potentially irreparable risks to UN Women's reputation. It gives UN Women the job of sanitizing the reputation of an asset management institution whose investments have contributed to some degree to climate catastrophe, the economic immiseration of women and other groups marginalized because of sexuality, gender, race, and class, and the proliferation of weapons and by association, the increased recourse to political violence in unstable politics. To see the world's leading institution for the defense of women's rights in league with an enabler of patriarchal dominance, violence, and ecological collapse, with not a word directed to critiquing or reforming BlackRock, could spell the end of UNWomen's credibility as a gender equality institution.

We urge UN Women immediately to **rescind and repudiate this partnership**, to honor its mandate to promote the highest standards of human rights, gender equality, environmental integrity and the wellbeing of people, as outlined in the SDG targets. We are aware that Member States are not fulfilling their financial commitments to fund the UN, or, even worse, orienting their contributions to serve narrow political purposes. This is a driver of the corporate capture of the UN, weakening its capacity to face the multilateral crises of our times. UN Women has made attempts in the past to partner with the private sector, with [companies such as Uber](#) or Coca Cola, with poor results. Other parts of the UN have been tempted to do the same; OHCHR for instance, made an [agreement with Microsoft](#). These efforts have failed to deliver either for the UN for the populations they ostensibly serve.

In a larger manner, the trend of a corporate capture of the UN is largely seen in the Secretary-General's *Our Common Agenda*, which places priority on a "networked multilateralism" with several multi-stakeholder proposals. Although more stakeholders participate in various processes, responsibility of governance and accountability to advancing the goals of the UN must remain with Member States. While the UN welcomes private donors, their influence is carried to shape program priorities. Multistakeholderism and networked multilateralism

assert duty bearers, rights holders, and corporate interests are all equal stakeholders and in doing so, obscures the power imbalances that exist among these groups. Corporations, unlike governments, are accountable to their shareholders with a view to increase profit. This, in many cases, is directly in conflict with the transformation needed to protect people and the planet. One example of this in Our Common Agenda is the proposal for a multistakeholder digital technology track in preparation for the 2023 Summit for the Future to agree on a Global Digital Compact to be informed by the existing [High Level Panel of Experts on Digital Cooperation](#), co-chaired by Melinda Gates and Jack Ma – two members of the corporate sector that have conflicting interests with the public good. How can global corporations be trusted to recommend the strict regulation needed of digital technologies?

The UN should not need to be reminded of its mandate by observers. Its governance systems should incorporate civil society leaders to help prevent these mistakes. For this reason, we recommend that feminist organizations should have formal seats in UN's advisory groups and leadership (including on its Executive Board).

It is essential and urgent that across the United Nations System, as entities turn to the private sector for funding and services, standards are set for transparency and accountability, based on human rights principles and aligned with the UN's normative goals and standards. Moreover, all partnerships should be underpinned by an understanding of the UN as the primary duty bearer internationally, and Member States as duty bearers first and foremost. Any partner whose operations undermine human rights and planetary integrity is inherently in conflict with the interests and mission of the United Nations at large.

In solidarity,