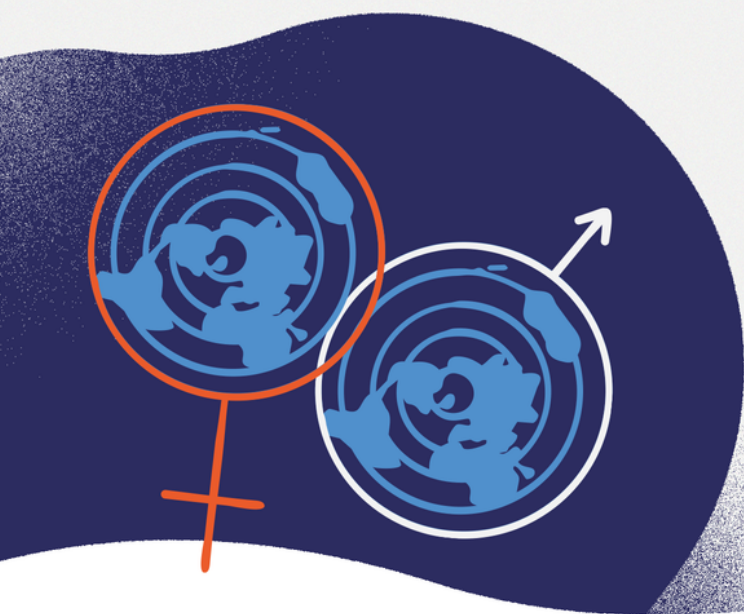




Advancing transparency, independence, and gender-inclusive leadership in the 1 for 8 Billion campaign for UN Secretary-General selection



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ABSTRACT

This policy brief examines how structural barriers, opaque selection practices, and gendered power dynamics shape the race for the next UNSG despite growing evidence of women's effectiveness in multilateral leadership. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines gender-disaggregated leadership data, documentary review, and interviews with senior female institutional stakeholders, it analyses how women's pathways remain constrained across formal and informal structures. Through a Pakistan-centred Global South lens, the brief argues that appointing the first woman Secretary-General is not only a question of equality, but a necessity for institutional efficacy.



Introduction

The selection of the United Nations Secretary-General embodies the fundamental tension between the organization's universal aspirations and the entrenched power dynamics of its founding structures. Article 97 of the UN Charter vests the Security Council with the authority to recommend a candidate to the General Assembly, a provision that has historically concentrated immense influence among the five permanent members (P5).

For seven decades, this framework operated via an opaque, papal conclave mechanism characterized by secretive straw polls and informal veto-driven bargaining.

While incremental reforms in 2015 (Resolution 69/321) introduced public nomination calls and General Assembly dialogues and vision statements, they fundamentally failed to dismantle the Security Council's veto monopoly and omitted the most vital reform proposed by civil society and progressive Member States: a single, non-renewable seven-year term.

The P5 vehemently opposed this measure because preserving the potential for a second term forces an incumbent Secretary-General to continuously appease permanent members. This appeasement frequently manifests as the conceding of high-level UN bureaucratic appointments to specific P5 nations in exchange for ongoing political support. As a result of these backroom deals which see top jobs promised for nationals of certain states, 20% of the roles at the rank of Under-Secretary-General or above have gone to the nationals of the five permanent members over 10 years, a rate nearly 10 times higher than is proportional.

This informal patronage system systematically sidelines women and Global South candidates who lack access to P5-dominated networks and, more importantly, renders the UN less diverse, less meritocratic, and ultimately less effective. The evolution of this structural framework is outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Historical Evolution of Selection Procedures

Historical Evolution of Selection Procedures	Key Features and Developments
1981	China casts a record 16 vetoes against Kurt Waldheim's third-term bid, solidifying the two-term limit and regional rotation norms.
1997	GA Resolution 51/241 formally calls for <i>due regard</i> to gender equality and regional rotation in the appointment process.
2016	Implementation of Resolution 69/321; first public hearings/dialogues with candidates; publication of CVs and vision statements.
2021	Resolution 75/325 adopted by the UNGA; the GA for the first time recognised the unbroken pattern of male SGs and suggests this should be a consideration for future candidate nominations (despite widespread support for more ambitious language, negotiations faced significant resistance from the P5, resulting in the adoption of relatively modest language on gender representation).
2025	Strengthening of transparency; calls for campaign financing disclosures and early formal nomination letters.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on literature review.

It is argued that this P5 stranglehold continues to obstruct the democratic will of the General Assembly and the broader global population.

Expert analysis suggests that when power interests conflict with gender equality goals, the P5 consistently prioritises the preservation of their own influence and manoeuvrability over the appointment of a female leader.

The 2016 race exposed these limitations as despite the presence of seven highly qualified female candidates, public transparency could not override private P5 straw polls, which systematically relegated female contenders through implicit gender biases.

Post-election analyses of the 2016 race highlight a pervasive, deeply entrenched double standard in how male and female candidates were evaluated by the diplomatic community and, ultimately, by the Security Council.

Historically, male Secretaries-General navigated the selection process without their fundamental executive competence being publicly questioned.

Instead, female candidates in 2016 faced intense, disproportionate scrutiny regarding their merit and were subjected to contradictory, inherently gendered stylistic critiques, viewed simultaneously as too forceful and aggressive or too soft and accommodating.

Beneath mere *lip service* and public rhetoric endorsing gender equality, deep-seated doubts existed among P5 decision-makers regarding whether a woman was practically strong enough to navigate global crises and military conflicts.

Fourteen of the fifteen members of the Security Council at the time were men, making it difficult for the Council to envision a woman at the top. Female candidates who demonstrated superior command of complex policy portfolios were systematically eliminated in the secretive straw polls, resulting in only one woman amongst the top five candidates, while four of the five at the bottom of the list were women.

The Reversal of 2025

Preparing for the 2026 cycle, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 79/327 in 2025 regarding the revitalisation of its work.

The resolution includes mandating financial disclosures for candidates and requiring sitting UN officials, such as heads of UN agencies, to suspend their roles while campaigning.

However, the negotiations revealed a rare and formidable display of unity among the otherwise fractured P5, operating in a strict damage limitation mode, to systematically block critical democratic advancements.

They rejected proposals from the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency (ACT) group to conduct advisory straw polls in the General Assembly, firmly shut down demands for multi-candidate recommendations (Security Council to recommend more than one candidate to the General Assembly), and entirely omitted references to civil society engagement.

Other proposed changes to the process that were not adopted include:

- Conducting a straw poll in the General Assembly (and not just in the Security Council) to give the General Assembly an enhanced role in the process and allow all Member States to express their views as to who should be Secretary-General.

- Establishing a definitive timeline for the selection and appointment process to provide a clear roadmap for every step of the procedure.

On the crucial front of gender parity, progressive proposals mandating that Member States nominate *only* female candidates were significantly watered down due to political pushback and a growing aversion to diversity mandates among certain global powers. The final text defaults to the weak diplomatic suggestion to strongly consider nominating women, lacking any binding enforcement mechanism.

Problem Statement

Despite UN commitments to gender parity enshrined in the 2017 System-wide Strategy, women remain starkly underrepresented as SG candidates (eight women vs. 48 men historically), heads of UN entities (21 major organisations have never had one), senior bureaucrats, and diplomats (only 7% of UN Permanent Representatives since 1947, 72 countries appointing none).

These gaps persist through diplomatic pipelines, especially in South Asia, despite women's frontline roles in peace and development.

Integrity and independence are often framed as abstract governance ideals, such as meritocracy or veto restraint. However, these discussions are rarely linked to how P5-dominated backroom deals for top posts sideline women and Global South talent lacking patronage networks. This was evident in the 2016 race, where qualified female candidates like Helen Clark performed strongly in public yet were privately eliminated through gendered double standards.

Methodology

This policy brief adopts a mixed-methods design, blending qualitative primary data from semi-structured interviews with quantitative analysis of leadership trends disaggregated by gender.

Interviews conducted in early 2026 with representatives from Pakistan's National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), UN Women, UNDP, and senior female diplomats (n=12) elicited nuanced insights on gendered barriers and the strategic value of women in leadership.

Key themes emerging from these discussions include persistent challenges for women in patriarchal contexts, such as the necessity of proving capability against male counterparts and overcoming systemic gender equality deficits.

Respondents highlighted the extra weight of societal expectations while pointing to historical precedents, such as Pakistan's female Prime Minister and National Assembly Speaker, as proof of leadership viability.

Complementing this, a desk review synthesizes UN gender parity strategies, leadership datasets from GWL Voices, and documentation on prior Secretary-General selection cycles.

Quantitative indicators track the proportions of women as heads of UN entities, historical female SG candidates, and the share of women in national bureaucracies with a specific focus on Pakistan and South Asia.

By intersecting these metrics with interview perceptions of integrity and transparency, this approach humanizes structural data. It reveals how Global South women leaders catalyze sustainable development and move the UN toward human-centered security frameworks as envisioned by UNSCR 1325.

The Glass Labyrinth

Structural and Cultural Barriers to Female Leadership

The failure of the UN to appoint a female Secretary-General is not a result of a lack of qualified candidates, but rather the manifestation of a *glass labyrinth*. This metaphor describes the continuous, multifaceted resistance women encounter from entry-level positions to the executive suite, replacing the concept of a single, transparent *glass ceiling*. Research into the career trajectories of women reveals that structural barriers are embedded in the very design of these institutions.

When women do break through to peak multilateral roles, they frequently navigate a glass cliff, taking charge during periods of intense instability with the added pressure of being a trailblazer in a highly scrutinized role.

This continued stagnation reveals the limitations of common metaphors like the *sticky floor*, *glass ceiling*, and *glass cliff*; it creates a significant lag in career progression, where women often reach senior levels later than their male counterparts or are sidelined into issue areas deemed feminine like health, education, or human rights.

Crucially, women are systematically sidelined into these areas through what researcher Kirsten Haack (2014) identifies as glass walls. Within the UN system, Haack categorized portfolios relating to welfare, poverty, and human rights as being associated with soft feminine issues, while security, trade, industrial development, and economic portfolios are related to hard masculine issues. Haack's data demonstrated that women had significantly more representation within UN agencies associated with soft functional areas, actively denying them the hard security credentials traditionally demanded for peak leadership.

The historic appointment of Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala to lead the WTO exemplifies this, where senior African leaders at the UN had to publicly condemn the coverage of her appointment as being sexist and racist, highlighting the intersecting burdens female leaders face.

Gendered Leadership Styles

The contemporary demand for female leadership at the helm of the United Nations is grounded in how female leadership has been systematically blocked in one of the most important organisations in the world.

A critical mechanism of this exclusion lies in how leadership is defined and evaluated; the most prominent theoretical framework for analyzing this is the distinction between transformational and transactional leadership modalities.

Regarding association with leadership roles, women are heavily socialized toward communal traits, emphasizing empathy, cooperativeness, and relationship-building, and are more likely to exhibit transformational leadership styles.

This approach frequently employs participative, democratic methodologies to flatten hierarchies, prioritize mentoring, and build broad-based consensus.

Experimental economics and behavioural game theory studies consistently corroborate that female leaders emphasize team building, give more importance to fairness in task allocation, and demonstrate markedly higher levels of cooperativeness in complex, stressful situations compared to male-led cohorts.

The archetype of an effective leader has been deeply and problematically conflated with masculine, agentic characteristics, such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, dominance, and fierce independence.

Schein's think manager-think male research demonstrates the ongoing association between leadership and masculine traits such as assertiveness and decisiveness, subtly shaping hiring, evaluation, and promotion practices, even within organisations that claim to be gender-neutral.

These traits align closely with transactional leadership, where male leaders demonstrate a significantly higher propensity to utilize an autocratic, task-oriented style.

Transactional leaders rely heavily on the rigid exchange of interests, establishing strict hierarchies, and deploying punitive measures to achieve short-term compliance.

These profound stylistic divergences are deeply rooted in lifelong societal socialization. Overreliance on a singular, male-coded leadership model is fundamentally flawed, as is associating effective geopolitical leadership exclusively with agentic, transactional traits.

The Double Standard of Competence and the Double Bind

Female leaders attempting to navigate multilateral institutions face a profound structural dilemma theorized under Role Congruity Theory, often referred to as the double bind.

Because the dominant, entrenched perception of global leadership relies heavily on masculine, agentic traits, women are frequently evaluated *ab initio* as lacking the necessary toughness, decisiveness, or strategic ruthlessness required for executive geopolitical roles.

This backlash effect significantly limits the strategic, communicative, and tactical options available to female leaders in high-stakes negotiations.

It forces them to navigate a precarious behavioural corridor that their male peers do not experience.

The double standards of competence (DSC) model suggests that due to men's historical occupation of leadership roles, women who serve as leaders must be exceptionally qualified to succeed.

Men have the freedom to adopt their preferred leadership style and still be considered suitable managers, whereas women must be highly intentional about adopting only the most effective behaviors to prove their competence as they're held to higher standards than men. Ultimately, implicit gender bias favors men over equally qualified women, creating a paradox of meritocracy.

Reflecting on her experience as a 2016 SG candidate, Susana Malcorra noted:

Women were subjected to gendered stylistic critiques, being viewed as too forceful and aggressive or too soft and accommodating, demonstrating how implicit gender biases permeate elite diplomatic assessments.

Yet, when female leaders actively adopt these requisite agentic behaviors, such as expressing anger, displaying dominance, or engaging in forceful diplomatic assertiveness, they face severe social and professional penalties for violating prescriptive communal gender norms.

Relevance to the UN Secretary-General Role

In the specific context of the United Nations Secretary-General role, a position that inherently requires the delicate navigation of intense geopolitical rivalries and complex conflict mediation, electing a woman is both symbolic and strategic.

As the Pact for the Future urges Member States to recommit to preventative diplomacy, and to “take into account [...] the regrettable fact that there has never been a woman Secretary-General” (Article 42, c), electing a strong female leader would help reposition the UN as an active, credible leader in global governance and demonstrate the organization’s commitment to gender equality.

When women are fully involved in leadership and decision-making, communities are demonstrably healthier, better resourced, and more stable.

— Kofi Annan

The ripple effects of inclusive, empathetic leadership extend well beyond the council chamber; research indicates that transformational leadership behaviors reduce the organisational culture-related barriers that other women face when seeking promotion.

However, the Security Council’s focus on lowest-common-denominator candidates actively suppresses this potential, often favoring political safety over transformative vision. In a deeply divided Council, a candidate who promises not to rock the boat is more likely to secure a recommendation than a feminist visionary who might challenge existing power imbalances.

It wasn't until 2021 that a General Assembly resolution officially recognised the unbroken pattern of male Secretaries-General, suggesting it should be a consideration for future nominations.

Mobilizing even this timid language saw an almighty struggle due to P5 resistance, as permanent members continually prioritize conventions that preserve their power over the application of feminist principles.

As Susana Malcorra highlighted, the need for transformative leadership is urgent and requires embracing a perspective that has been absent for eighty years.

While the UN's Gender Parity Strategy has been successful in changing the demography at the top, dominant styles of leadership still tend to be patriarchal.

The problem isn't that one gender leads better than the other; it is that organisational structures and cultural expectations have historically been built around a narrow, masculine model of leadership that penalizes the collaborative qualities critical for long-term organisational success.

The Empirical Impact on International Peace and Security

Female leadership has a substantive, empirically validated impact in the high-stakes realm of international peace and security.

The foundational international legal framework for this involvement is UNSCR 1325, unanimously adopted in 2000, which formally recognised the critical, indispensable role of women in conflict prevention, conflict management, and post-conflict reconstruction.

A quarter-century of quantitative and qualitative data accumulated since the passage of UNSCR 1325 shows that gender equality and active female participation in governance are the most reliable direct predictors of state stability and international peace.

Research on women, peace, and security provides strong evidence that nation-states with higher levels of women's political participation and structural gender equality are significantly less likely to engage in interstate armed conflict, far less likely to rely on military force or aggressive posturing to resolve international diplomatic disputes, and experience a substantially lower risk of internal civil war.

Table 2: Evidence on Women's Participation and Peace Outcomes

Conflict Prevention	Demographic conflict research indicates that a mere 5 percent increase in the proportion of women in a national legislature decreases the state's overall likelihood to use state-sponsored violence by nearly five times.
Post-Conflict Stability	When women comprise a critical mass of at least 35 percent of a national legislature, the statistical risk of a state relapsing into civil conflict following a peace agreement approaches absolute zero.
Treaty Durability	Comprehensive statistical analyses of 182 peace agreements demonstrate that when women are meaningfully included as official negotiators, mediators, witnesses, or signatories, the resulting peace agreement is 20 percent more likely to last at least two years, and an astonishing 35 percent more likely to endure for at least 15 years.
The Cost of Exclusion	Analysis of 39 failed peace agreements found that 31 of them had completely excluded women from the negotiation table.
Conflict Resolution	In complex international security dialogues, such as nuclear non-proliferation talks, research indicates that women's participation in the resolution of nuclear issues reduces the potential for risk-taking behaviour and increases the likelihood that negotiated agreements would hold, while also contributing innovative ideas.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on literature review.

The specific mechanisms driving these vastly superior outcomes are deeply rooted in the divergent approaches and priorities women bring to the negotiating table. Women's meaningful engagement in peace and security processes is statistically more likely to build broad, highly inclusive coalitions that successfully bridge deep-seated societal, ethnic, and religious divides, reaching across conflict lines to find common ground.

Within UN peacekeeping missions, the meaningful participation of women, defined not merely by token numerical presence but by full integration into mission leadership and operational planning, significantly improves overall mission effectiveness.

Female peacekeepers enhance vital information gathering, regarding sexual abuse among other subjects, in culturally sensitive or conservative contexts where male troops cannot interact with local women, and their presence exerts a civilizing effect on the tragic instances of sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated by the peacekeeping troops themselves.

Despite this overwhelming empirical evidence, women remain systematically excluded from the highest echelons of the global peace and security infrastructure.

In 2022, women represented a mere 16 percent of negotiators in UN-led or co-led peace processes, a disturbing decline from 23 percent in 2020.

Alarming, of the 18 formal peace agreements concluded globally in 2022, only one featured a female signatory. The appointment of a female UN Secretary-General is the single most critical mechanism available to operationalize the evidence base of UNSCR 1325.

At a moment when global cooperation is failing, a strong female leader could usher in a revitalized era of diplomacy and collective action.

The Multilateral Representation Gap

Current Data and Systemic Trends

The exclusion of women from the office of the Secretary-General is the highly visible apex of a systemic pipeline that limits female leadership across the entire multilateral system.

Data compiled by the advocacy group GWL Voices for their flagship report *Women in Multilateralism* highlights a persistent, structural disparity in exactly how global governance is administered.

The historical data reveals that since 1945, these multilateral institutions have collectively elected a total of 606 leaders; of these, an overwhelming 522 were men, while only 84 were women.

While recent years have seen heavily publicized, marginal gains at the executive tier, with 46 percent of the 62 major multilateral organisations analyzed currently headed by women, this statistical parity is highly fragile.

The disparity deepens significantly and disturbingly within the actual governing bodies of these organisations, the executive boards, councils, and assemblies where Member States directly appoint their national representatives to dictate policy and control budgets.

In critical arenas of concentrated, structural decision-making power, female representation stagnates severely. National governments across the globe also continue to overwhelmingly default to male appointments when assigning hard diplomatic and governing power.

As a direct result of this pipeline exclusion, there have been 20 entire years where UN General Assemblies have convened without the participation of a single female Permanent Representative.

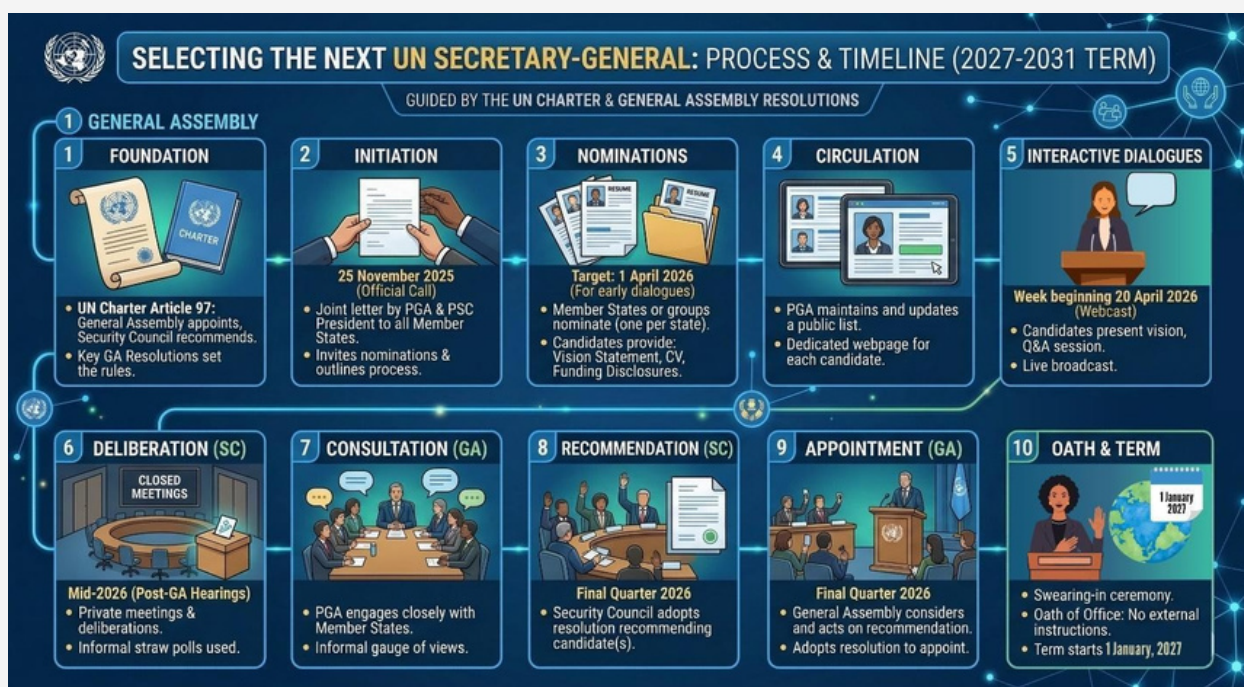
Table 3: Patterns of Gender Exclusion in UN Leadership

Governance Tier / Leadership Metric	Historical Exclusion Data & Context
UN Secretary-General	9 men, 0 women in 80 years. 48 male candidates vs 8 female candidates historically.
Heads of Multilateral Organisations	21 out of 62 orgs have never had a female head; 20 have had only one since their founding.
UN Permanent Representatives (PRs)	72 countries have never appointed a female PR; only about 7% of all PRs historically have been women.
UN General Assembly Presidents	75 men, 5 women since 1946.
Governing bodies	28% average share of women in governing bodies; 12 with less than 25% women.

Source: GWL Voices (2026). *Women in Multilateralism 2026: The unfinished quest for gender parity*

The 2026 Reform Agenda

As the United Nations prepares for the highly consequential 2026 selection process, a vast coalition of civil society organisations, feminist networks, and progressive Member States are mobilizing to expand the procedural reforms initiated in 2015. Despite clear global demands, the P5 aggressively use their privilege to guard practices that preserve its concentrated power in the Security Council. During recent negotiations, four of the P5 members coordinated positions to block references to recommending multiple candidates and reviewing the renewability of the Secretary-General's tenure. Diplomats involved in the negotiations reported that the United States led this group in ensuring these popular proposals were excluded from resolutions.



Source: Based on [Donaldson \(2025\)](#)

The timeline presented is provisional and subject to change. The only definitive deadline is that an appointment must be made by December 31, 2026, when the current Secretary-General's term concludes.

Remarkably, the permanent members are not merely blocking the proposals themselves; they are actively using their influence to block the mere call for discussions to take place. Research demonstrates that over two-thirds of the UN's membership either supports these reforms or feels they merit discussion, yet the P5 and a few outliers remain the sole barrier to debate.

Quantifying Diplomatic Momentum

The E10 Power Bloc

Despite P5 resistance, diplomatic momentum for a female Secretary-General is quantifiably growing across regional divides. The Statements Tracker, a rigorous data project developed by the New York University Center for Global Affairs (NYU CGA), in partnership with 1 for 8 Billion and the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, indicates that as of late 2025, 145 countries have publicly utilised official UN forums to raise concerns regarding the UN's gender imbalance.

Within this group, at least 46 countries have expressed *strong support* for a woman leader, while states such as Denmark and Latvia have shown *very strong support* by actively proposing specific procedural measures. In this scenario, the E10 gains particular relevance due to the following factors:

- Because an official recommendation requires nine affirmative votes with no P5 vetoes, a candidate unanimously backed by the P5 must still secure at least four E10 votes to prevail.
- Crucially, a unified bloc of just seven E10 states possesses the power to veto and block any nominee they feel fails to embody the institution's core values of gender parity.
- Currently, the E10 is divided: five Member States (Bahrain, Greece, Liberia, Denmark, and Latvia) are leading the push, while Pakistan, alongside Colombia, Panama, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, has thus far only participated in joint statements indicating indirect support for a woman Secretary-General.

Pakistan's Strategic Opportunity

Despite its currently indirect stance, Pakistan's tenure on the UN Security Council (2025-2026) perfectly aligns with the climax of the selection timeline, presenting a paramount strategic opportunity. As a prominent voice for the Global South, a major troop-contributing country, and a state navigating a complex domestic landscape regarding gender rights, Pakistan possesses a highly leveraged diplomatic entry point.

By actively coordinating with the broader E10 bloc, which has recently united to push back against disproportionate Security Council dynamics by demanding more inclusive penholding, transparent working methods, and limits on the scope of the veto, Pakistan can push back against P5 opacity during the critical mid-2026 straw polls.

Furthermore, Pakistan's historical commitments to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, demonstrated by its deployment of Female Engagement Teams in peacekeeping missions, provide a highly credible foundation to argue that female leadership is an operational necessity for the UN's core security mandate.

Beyond the Security Council, the General Assembly holds the definitive final say in the second half of 2026, possessing the constitutional authority to reject a recommended candidate.

Member States eager to break the glass ceiling must proactively mobilise to hold indicative General Assembly votes early in the process, allowing the broader membership to officially signal its preferences before the Security Council finalises its choice.

Female leadership is an operational necessity for the UN's core security mandate.

Concluding remarks:

The 2026 Secretary-General selection is a definitive test of the United Nations' legitimacy in a fragmented world. The appointment process has evolved significantly from entirely closed-door bargaining to a more open, rules-based exercise. The reforms of 2015, and now resolution 79/327, have strengthened transparency and widened participation, but they have not erased the deep political dynamics that still shape the outcome. Procedural transparency through public hearings has proven insufficient to dismantle the hard-power monopoly of the P5. Without aggressive structural disruption, the 1 for 8 Billion ideal remains a symbolic aspiration.

The UN's symbolic value, moral authority, and normative power remain its greatest assets. Today, it is more important than ever that the General Assembly reasserts its constitutional role and breaks the P5's habit of uniting around lowest-common-denominator outcomes.

To allow the desire to maintain Security Council power to supersede the implementation of a feminist approach will only serve to perpetuate an 80-year unbroken chain of male UN chiefs, failing the very citizens the institution was built to protect. It is vital that the first woman Secretary-General be willing and able to practice Feminist Multilateralism.

Given the disproportionate scrutiny and professional penalties women endure in high-level politics, Member States and civil society must collaboratively build strong political and diplomatic support structures necessary to bring about human rights and development reforms and govern effectively. Ultimately, understanding the gendered nature of political leadership and decision-making is more important than ever as the international community attempts to rebuild a sustainable, resilient, and inclusive future.

Recommendations

While there is an unprecedented global mobilization with coalitions of Member States, global civil society organisations, and advocacy networks demanding the appointment of the first female Secretary-General, there is an urgent need to revitalize the organization's legitimacy, ethical authority, and practical efficacy in a fragmented world. Eight billion people cannot ethically or practically remain subject to elite, opaque, and exclusionary horse-trading. To operationalize these goals, the following structural reforms are imperative:

01

An absolute demand for the appointment of the first female Secretary-General, viewing gender parity not as a preference, but as a binding operational necessity and a legal obligation under the UN Charter and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Advocacy networks, including the ACT (Accountability, Coherence and Transparency) group of states, are pushing beyond mere encouragement to demand that states *only* nominate qualified female candidates. Furthermore, broader civil society coalitions are actively advocating for an all-female candidate pool.

02

A commitment from all Member States to uphold the independence of candidates and refrain from backroom deals regarding senior UN appointments, including arrangements involving political support or restraint in the use of the veto, and likewise a strict commitment from all candidates not to enter into such bargains.

03

A demand that the Security Council recommend two or more final candidates to the General Assembly. This reform would fundamentally democratize the final decision, empowering the General Assembly to make a genuine choice rather than acting as a mere rubber stamp for the Security Council's backroom compromise.

Recommendations

04

Implementing a single, non-renewable seven-year term for the Secretary-General. This structural change is designed to eliminate the intense political compromises and appeasement of the P5 that incumbent Secretaries-General often engage in during their first term to ensure they are not vetoed for a second term.

05

The President of the General Assembly (PGA) should leverage the wider UN membership to hold indicative straw polls within the General Assembly. This would officially signal the wider membership's top choices and counter the secrecy of the Security Council's closed-door polls. Demanding transparency and public reporting regarding the outcomes of the Security Council's straw polls is also important to prevent the silent, unaccountable vetoing of progressive or female candidates by permanent members.

06

Member States must go beyond simply nominating female candidates. They must be fully committed to *appointing* one and be willing to aggressively push back against the Security Council if it attempts to recommend another male candidate.

Recommendations

07

Ensure that civil society participation in the 2026 hearings is highly substantive, matching the critical role advocacy groups played in dragging the selection process into the public eye in 2016. The UN must restore and expand the formal role of civil society in the selection resolutions, which the P5 recently attempted to suppress.

08

An operational commitment by Member States championing Feminist Foreign Policy to mandate sustained female leadership across all UN appointments, moving beyond the tokenism of single, isolated appointments. Because evidence shows that a single, isolated female leader rarely alters an organization's internal gender parity or culture; a critical mass is required to permanently shift institutional culture, states must actively advocate for consecutive and concurrent female leaders at the highest levels to successfully integrate intersectional gender perspectives into macro-economics, climate action, and nuclear disarmament.

Sustainable Development Policy Institute

SDPI, Pakistan

SDPI is an independent, non-profit think tank based in Islamabad, Pakistan. It conducts policy-oriented research and analysis to inform decision-making on sustainable development, governance, and public policy. Its work engages a wide range of stakeholders, including government, civil society, and international partners. In this report, SDPI contributes with an analysis of the structural and institutional barriers that shape women's pathways to leadership, alongside insights into how political dynamics influence candidate viability in multilateral selection processes.

SDPI is a member of **Southern Voice**, a network of Global South think tanks working to amplify evidence-based perspectives in global development debates, and participates in the **1 for 8 Billion** campaign as a Campaign Partner, contributing research to inform the selection of the next UN Secretary-General.

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