

Rethinking the Selection of the UN Secretary-General: Insights from the Global South



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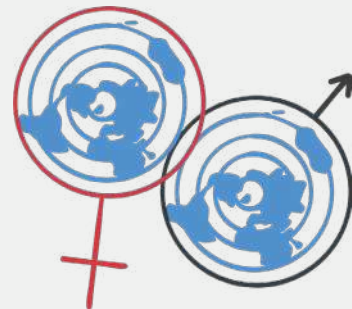
A message from Southern Voice

Executive Director, Margarita Gómez

We are living in a moment of profound global uncertainty, marked by geopolitical shifts and increasing pressure on multilateral institutions. The selection of the next United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG) is a defining moment for global governance and its legitimacy. The officeholder will play a critical role in shaping how the international community responds to today's most complex challenges, from climate change and conflict to inequality and development. Therefore, ensuring that this process is inclusive, transparent, and representative is more important than ever.

This publication brings together five policy briefs developed by [Southern Voice](#)'s members and campaign partners of the 1 for 8 Billion campaign: the Centro de Implementación de Políticas Públicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento ([CIPPEC, Argentina](#)), the Centre for Policy Dialogue ([CPD, Bangladesh](#)), the Economic and Social Research Foundation ([ESRF, Tanzania](#)), the Sustainable Development Policy Institute ([SDPI, Pakistan](#)), and Solidar Tunisie ([Tunisia](#)).

It offers a Global South contribution to the selection of the next UNSG, with each brief bringing a distinct national lens. Our Bangladeshi partner draws on its experience of women's leadership and sustained engagement in peacekeeping and humanitarian crises to reassess what effective UN action requires. Our Tanzanian partner highlights the misalignment between where global crises are concentrated and where authority sits, linking gender and geographic representation to institutional credibility. Our Argentine partner focuses on the selection process itself, emphasising transparency, participation, and the role of elite networks in shaping legitimacy. Our Pakistani partner examines the cumulative barriers shaping women's career pathways and highlights how membership of the ten elected, non-permanent members of the Security Council (E10) can be used to influence the political dynamics of the selection process. Finally, our Tunisian partner draws on its national experience to show how institutional, political, and socio-cultural constraints continue to structure access to power.



Together, these contributions connect local realities with global governance debates and bring sharper insight into what effective governance demands. Southern Voice's membership contributes by bringing grounded national experience and evidence into one of the most consequential decisions facing the multilateral system. The 2026 selection is not only an appointment decision. It is a test of the rules, power structures, and political constraints that shape who can lead the United Nations, and with what authority. More fundamentally, it reflects the health of the system itself.

Reimagining global leadership, therefore, requires more than opening the process. It requires rebalancing whose voices count, whose experiences inform decisions, and whose realities define the priorities of the system. This report contributes to that effort.



Margarita Gómez
Southern Voice, Executive Director

A message from Ben Donaldson, Advisor to the 1 for 8 Billion Campaign

As humanity grapples with global challenges and major changes to our economies and societies, the United Nations Secretary-General has a unique role in mobilising action and delivering for the world's eight billion people. The next UNSG will be appointed in late 2026 and begin their tenure on 1 January 2027.

1 for 8 Billion exists to advocate for a fair, open, inclusive, and transformative selection process. A stronger approach leads to a stronger UN chief, equipped with credibility and a mandate to lead.

The UN was founded to serve “We the peoples” of the world. We the people therefore have a right to have a say over who is chosen, and how.

Our top priorities are:



The appointment of a woman Secretary-General committed to the core values of the UN, including human rights, equality, global justice, and multilateralism



Supporting an inclusive, transparent selection shaped by the wider UN membership, with meaningful participation from global civil society

At a time when international law is openly flouted by the UN's permanent members, regional conflict is escalating, and the UN's resources are being stripped back, humanity needs a global organisation to stand up for the powerless and vulnerable and act as a standard bearer for multilateralism and human rights. To be effective, the next United Nations leader will need the legitimacy conferred by an open, accountable recruitment procedure and the independence to build a strong, diverse senior team around them.

This means:



Giving all governments and people a chance to shape the process



Ensuring candidates can focus on their vision for the organisation, rather than making backroom deals with powerful member states



Making history by appointing a woman to the role for the first time since the UN's founding 80 years ago

We will shine a spotlight on the procedure, working with the UN, states, and civil society to ensure the most transparent and accountable selection possible, and expose any efforts to undermine its integrity or stand in the way of the most talented candidates.

Our steering committee – CIVICUS, Plataforma CIPÓ, Southern Voice, GQUAL, UNA-UK, and Woman SG – reflects the diverse strengths of our network, our strong base in the Global South, and our ambition to take this process out of the “UN bubble” and into capitals and communities across the world. This report, and the expertise and insights from different regions that it embodies, is a manifestation of this ambition.

For more information and to get involved: www.1for8billion.org



Ben Donaldson

1 for 8 Billion Campaign Advisor

Cross-cutting Insights:

A Global South perspective on how leadership is shaped

The debate around the next Secretary-General often centres on candidates. The contributions in this report shift the focus beyond individuals to the conditions that determine who becomes viable in the first place.

The five partner briefs approach the Secretary-General selection process from distinct national and thematic angles. Taken together, they point to a deeper, shared diagnosis: the question is no longer only who leads the United Nations (UN), but how authority is produced, validated, and constrained.

The stakes are immediate. In a context of geopolitical fragmentation, multilateral institutions are under growing pressure to deliver with limited authority and uneven support. Under these conditions, the way the role is filled is inseparable from the system's capacity to respond.

Across the briefs, a consistent concern emerges: a selection process that remains largely opaque, politically constrained, and uneven in participation produces leadership with limited initial authority. Legitimacy is not conferred at appointment alone. It depends on whether it reflects broader membership, diverse realities, and fair competition. Without this, the Secretary-General enters office with reduced capacity to mobilise trust, build and sustain coalitions, and act independently.

The selection process begins well before its formal initiation – this is merely when the process becomes visible. Candidates are filtered through diplomatic signalling, nomination practices, and informal assessments of acceptability, narrowing the field early and outside of public scrutiny. The issue is not only whether the process is open, but whether the means to access political viability excludes certain profiles from the outset. This is particularly evident in the persistent barriers facing women candidates and those without good preexisting links to powerful governments.

In this context, the case for a woman Secretary-General is not framed as a matter of symbolic representation or fairness alone, but also as a question of effectiveness. The briefs document persistent structural and socio-cultural barriers, and at the same time point to forms of leadership experience and practice that remain undervalued in how viability is assessed. The result is not only exclusion, but a narrowing of the leadership profiles the system is able to recognise and draw upon

The pattern is reinforced by organisational practices, including informal networks and politically negotiated appointments, as well as structural and socio-cultural barriers. These range from entrenched stereotypes about authority to constraints that shape who is able to enter, advance, and be recognised within the system.

Taken together, these factors point to a deeper constraint on how authority is exercised within the system. The appointment of a woman at the top would not, on its own, alter how decisions are made or how power circulates. What also matters is the broader ecosystem of senior appointments, where authority is distributed, appointments are negotiated, and transparency remains uneven.

The Global South perspective reflected in the briefs adds a critical dimension to this analysis. It is grounded in lived operational realities. Countries and regions across Africa, Asia, and Latin America are at the forefront of peacekeeping contributions, development constraints, climate vulnerability, democratic pressures, and humanitarian crises. This lens centres on meaningful participation in decision-making, ensuring that those most affected help shape priorities, inform responses, and strengthen the system's effectiveness and credibility.

These constraints also define what is politically possible. The briefs point to the limits of normative arguments on their own, highlighting instead the importance of political organisation. Regional coordination, cross-regional alliances, and early support for candidates emerge as critical mechanisms to expand the space of possibility, particularly in a system where veto dynamics and informal negotiations continue to shape outcomes. Reform becomes more feasible when gender equality, transparency, and regional balance are advanced as part of a shared political strategy.

The 2026 selection process will shape not only the authority of the next Secretary-General, but confidence in the system they are meant to lead. The United Nations promotes inclusion, equality, democracy, and accountability as core principles. Whether these are reflected in its own leadership selection will influence how credible those commitments appear in practice. At stake is not only who leads, but whether decisions affecting billions continue to be shaped by a narrow set of actors, or by a system that reflects broader participation and legitimacy.

The Next UN Secretary-General from a Global South Perspective:

Legitimacy, Effectiveness, and a Historic Opportunity for Gender Equity

Center for the Implementation of Public Policies
Promoting Equity and Growth (CIPPEC, Argentina)

Authors:

Gala Díaz Langou – Executive Director at CIPPEC

Abril García Mur – Coordinator of Social Protection Program at CIPPEC

Bruno Muñoz – Coordinator of Social Protection Program at CIPPEC

Core Question:

How can a more participatory and transparent selection process for the next UNSG strengthen the legitimacy, independence, and effectiveness of the Organisation's leadership, while advancing women's participation and amplifying Global South priorities?

Abstract:

This policy brief examines why the selection procedure for the next UNSG matters for strengthening the effectiveness of the organisation amid the current crisis of multilateralism and the historic opportunity presented by the 2025–2026 appointment cycle. It argues that a more participatory and transparent process, together with the appointment of the first woman Secretary-General, can reinforce legitimacy, independence, and institutional responsiveness. From a Global South perspective, the brief addresses unequal power structures in global governance. Methodologically, it combines a qualitative review of academic and policy literature with analysis of UN resolutions and political positions by actors from Latin America and the Caribbean.

Policy Findings:

1 This is a historic opportunity: legitimacy from the outset will shape whether the next Secretary-General can govern effectively and coordinate action on global risks

In a fragmented geopolitical context, legitimacy and governability from the outset of the selection procedure are conditions for the next Secretary-General to exercise authority with credibility, build coalitions, and sustain reform agendas. Without that political foundation, the new leadership will have limited room to coordinate responses to global risks that no state can manage alone.

2 The effectiveness of the next Secretary-General depends on the wider senior appointments ecosystem

Focusing solely on the selection of the Secretary-General overlooks a central governance issue: the ecosystem of senior appointments that surrounds, supports, or constrains the mandate of the incoming officeholder. The political-technical team also reflects how priorities are translated into operational decisions.

3 The absence of a woman Secretary-General over eight decades reflects structural barriers, cumulative biases, and has impeded institutional performance

The absence of a woman at the apex of the system is not an issue of individual merit, but rather evidence that institutional structures are gendered: organisations are built around assumptions about career paths, fitness for office, and standards of performance historically associated with masculinised norms.

4 From the Global South, representation claims are linked to substantive priorities for rebuilding legitimacy

The Global South debate is linked to substantive priorities, including access to concessional finance, a more predictable debt architecture, climate adaptation, food security, and gender equality. Demands for women's leadership, geographic balance, and greater procedural openness are therefore positioned as necessary conditions for rebuilding legitimacy through more responsive multilateral governance.

5 Institutional legitimacy depends on whether the selection process reflects the UN's stated values

The crisis of trust in multilateralism is deepened when the principles the UN promotes are not reflected in the way its own appointments are selected. Better aligning UN senior posts with reforms for equality, inclusion, transparency, and geographic balance is a condition of political authority and long-term credibility.

Why this matters:

Current debates continue to show that stronger civil society participation, a more substantive General Assembly role, and greater transparency in Security Council practices are political conditions for safeguarding both the independence of the office and the legitimacy of the selection process. These same standards also shape expectations for the wider senior governance ecosystem, where concentration remains acute, with the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (P5) holding over 20 per cent of top UN posts between 1995 and 2022 (Blue Smoke, 2023).

The wider ecosystem also continues to reproduce gendered exclusion. Women have held only 7 per cent of permanent representative appointments (GWL Voices, 2025), while growing calls for regional and gender renewal are repositioning the procedure as part of a broader debate on global governance. The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) frames this as a matter of equitable geographic balance, and the July 2025 statement by former foreign ministers goes further by explicitly calling for a woman to lead the UN.

Ultimately, the appointment has become a test of whether the UN's normative commitments are reflected in practice. When concentrated decision-making, opaque validation mechanisms, and gender exclusion continue to shape outcomes through informal rules, they weaken trust, erode coalition-building capacity, and undermine the authority needed to lead reform in a fragmented multilateral environment.

Policy Recommendations:

1 Define public, comparable criteria to assess candidates

The General Assembly should promote minimum evaluation criteria for candidates, including integrity, executive experience, coalition-building capacity, commitment to the Charter, leadership in complex contexts, and gender equality.

2 Strengthen the General Assembly's substantive role ahead of the final appointment

Member States should advance mechanisms to express preferences more systematically, such as non-binding consultation or political signalling modalities, to broaden the legitimacy of the process and help rebalance existing asymmetries.

3 Embed gender equality from the nomination stage

Member States should prioritise nominating highly qualified women and explore joint nominations to broaden early political support. Regional blocs can reinforce this signal through explicit political positions.

4 Link the Secretary-General selection to standards for senior UN appointments

The debate on the Secretary-General should open a broader agenda on diversity, geographic balance, integrity, and fitness for office across senior appointments, so that opaque practices in wider appointments do not erode the legitimacy of the mandate.

5 Ensure meaningful civil society participation

Civil society engagement should have clear rules, sufficient time, and mechanisms to synthesise inputs.

6 Promote Global South coordination around a common reform agenda

Regional blocs should articulate positions that combine gender equality, geographic balance, and procedural improvements, increasing influence and turning representation demands into a more concrete global governance proposal.

Read the full policy brief here:



Rethinking UN Leadership in a Fragmented World: A Bangladesh-Centred Perspective

Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD, Bangladesh)

Authors:

Fahmida Khatun – Executive Director at CPD

Afrin Mahbub – Research Associate at CPD

Ayesha Suhaima Rab – Programme Associate at CPD

Core Question:

What kind of UN leadership can strengthen the organisation's credibility, inclusiveness, and ability to respond to global crises when viewed through Bangladesh's experience of gender representation, institutional reform, and participatory governance?

Abstract:

This policy paper explores the kind of UN leadership the future deserves in a context of geopolitical fragmentation and humanitarian crisis. Adopting Bangladesh as an analytical lens, it examines patterns of gender underrepresentation. Drawing on direct consultations with civil society organisations in Bangladesh, the paper reassesses expectations for the role by documenting stakeholder perspectives on the next Secretary-General. It argues that future reform should focus not only on creating opportunities to appoint a woman as Secretary-General, but also on fostering the conditions that support the emergence of capable, inclusive, and effective governance.

Policy Findings:

1 **The current crisis context emphasises the type of UN leadership the modern era requires**

The next UNSG must provide systems-level coordination capable of responding to an increasingly interconnected crisis environment marked by institutional paralysis, shrinking resources, and expanding operational demands.

2 **Gender equality's institutionalisation has raised the legitimacy threshold for UN governance and institutional practice**

Through decades, gender equality moved from a largely declarative principle into a formal area of UN policy. As a result, commitments to equality now shape not only the UN's external normative agenda, but also the expectations placed on its own institutional design.

3 **Women's underrepresentation in decision-making roles remains structurally embedded**

Institutional, political, and socio-cultural barriers continue to shape who gains credibility, and access to career pathways, even in contexts with visible women at the top.

4 **Effective representation requires autonomy, institutional support, and access to strategic decision-making roles**

Institutional mechanisms such as quotas or parity targets can improve quantitative representation, but representation should not be evaluated solely in numerical terms. Meaningful influence depends on whether women can exercise authority within strategic portfolios and decision-making structures.

5 **In the UN, the nomination stage is itself a major site of exclusion**

The pool of viable women candidates is narrowed before the formal contest begins. Member States continue to nominate men more frequently, while standards of merit appear to be applied more stringently to women, making the nomination process itself self-limiting.

6 **Bangladesh's crisis exposure sharpens expectations for leadership that protects vulnerable populations and restores UN credibility**

From the perspective of Bangladeshi civil society and policy actors, the next Secretary-General should prioritise strengthening the UN's credibility and effectiveness in responding to protracted humanitarian and security crises.

Why this matters:

Institutional, operational, and geopolitical crises are converging to redefine what the UN now requires from its next Secretary-General. The qualities now in demand align with the organisation's normative trajectory. Stakeholder consultations in Bangladesh make this concrete by prioritising coalition-building, strategic vision, and responsiveness to conflict and climate risk.

Visible gains at the top continue to mask restricted access to substantive senior positions. In the UN, women have held only five Presidencies of the General Assembly since 1946 and around 7 per cent of Permanent Representative positions, while in Bangladesh, despite women holding the top political office for much of the past three decades, their 21 per cent parliamentary representation still translated into only 7.3 per cent direct electoral access ([GWL Voices, 2026](#)). These patterns point to structural barriers in nomination and career progression that continue to restrict access to decision-making authority.

Bangladesh's contribution of more than 150,000 peacekeepers across 54 UN missions ([Bangladesh Army, 2026](#)), alongside the unresolved Rohingya crisis, highlights its dual stake in effective UN engagement: as a major contributor to global peace operations and as a country that depends on stronger UN diplomacy to help resolve the refugee crisis. This national scenario underscores the need for a UNSG able to translate institutional authority into meaningful diplomatic engagement on behalf of vulnerable populations.

Policy Recommendations:

- 1 Strengthen civil society organisation engagement with governments on nominations and support**

CSOs should engage in constructive dialogue with national institutions and play a more prominent role in pressing governments to nominate qualified women candidates for the position of UNSG.
- 2 Sustain advocacy despite the political nature of the process**

Even when hindered by political barriers, continued advocacy on the UNSG selection procedure is essential to maintaining momentum and strengthening the case for gender equality in global leadership.
- 3 Build a merit-based UNSG selection process**

The nomination should be more transparent and based on merit, rather than shaped by political bargaining among powerful states.

4 UN's financial independence as a check on political imbalance

Strengthen the UN's financial independence to reduce the disproportionate influence of politically and financially powerful countries.

5 Prioritise qualified women candidates committed to inclusive governance

Member States should play a more prominent role in nominating women leaders who demonstrate both competence and a commitment to inclusive global governance.

6 Use selection criteria that prioritise inclusion, diverse perspectives, and UN values

Selection criteria should focus on the ability to represent diverse perspectives, advance the interests of marginalised communities, and uphold the UN's core values.

7 Expand women's diplomatic pipelines and international exposure

Member States should actively promote women to senior diplomatic positions and provide them with greater international exposure.

8 Use institutional mechanisms as enabling tools, not as sufficient measures on their own

Mechanisms for inclusion, such as quotas or reserved positions, should be accompanied by the institutional support, autonomy, and decision-making authority necessary for women to exercise meaningful influence over policy outcomes.

9 Build gender-friendly institutional environments that support women's advancement pathways

Institutional reforms should include supportive workplace policies, executive training, and measures that address structural barriers preventing women from entering, remaining in, and advancing through leadership pathways in national, global, and multilateral settings.

Read the full policy brief here:



Eighty Years Without a Woman Secretary-General:

Gender, Geography, and UN Leadership Legitimacy

Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF, Tanzania)

Authors:

Linda Mhando – Senior Research Fellow at ESRF and Penn State Law

Richard Ngilangwa – Research Fellow at ESRF

Vivian Kazi – Senior Research Fellow at ESRF

Core Question:

How can the appointment of a woman Secretary-General strengthen the legitimacy, credibility, and effectiveness of UN leadership in a context where crisis burdens are concentrated in the Global South but leadership representation remains geographically and gender imbalanced?

Abstract:

This policy brief examines how appointing a woman Secretary-General can strengthen the legitimacy, credibility, and effectiveness of UN leadership at a time when conflict, climate disruption, debt distress, and youth unemployment are concentrated in Africa and the broader Global South. It shows that the continued exclusion of women and the underrepresentation of crisis-affected regions in senior leadership weaken alignment between the UN's operational burdens and its leadership structures. Combining empirical evidence, legal obligations, and Tanzania's diplomatic tradition of sovereign equality and multilateral reform, the brief treats gender and geographic representation as conditions for better judgement, stronger responsiveness, and institutional credibility.

Policy Findings:

1 **Interlocking crises are concentrated in the Global South, while leadership representation remains misaligned**

Across peacekeeping, climate vulnerability, sovereign debt distress, and youth unemployment, a consistent pattern emerges: the regions bearing the greatest developmental burdens remain underrepresented. This gap is geographic, gendered and generational.

2 **Institutional credibility requires a fair selection process and meaningful representation**

The decisive stage of selection remains concentrated in the Security Council, where veto authority is retained by five permanent members despite the UN's deepest operational exposure being in regions such as Africa, which still holds no permanent seat.

3 **Gender balance in UN leadership is a legal and normative obligation**

After eight decades without a woman Secretary-General, UN leadership practice remains out of step with established legal and normative commitments on gender balance.

4 **Institutional performance under crisis conditions depends on diversity of experience**

Leadership shaped by peacekeeping exposure, climate vulnerability, sovereign debt pressures, and broader Global South realities strengthens the deliberative quality and policy relevance of institutional judgement under crisis conditions.

5 **Gender imbalance persists because nomination and validation pipelines remain exclusionary**

Unequal nomination pathways, narrower visibility routes, and heightened scrutiny continue to shape which candidates are considered politically viable.

6 **Leadership reform must extend beyond the Secretary-General to the architecture of senior appointments**

Senior leadership appointments should not continue to reproduce gendered and geographic concentration, particularly in portfolios where crisis response and strategic direction are shaped.

7 Tanzania is well positioned to advance leadership reform through diplomatic coherence

Tanzania may propel this agenda by aligning its treaty commitments, diplomatic tradition, and multilateral strategy to support the appointment of a woman Secretary-General. The potential of this positioning reflects a sustained diplomatic trajectory grounded in sovereign equality, African representation, and systemic reform.

Why this matters:

Leadership legitimacy is grounded in the arenas where the UN is most operationally tested. With around 80 per cent of peacekeeping missions deployed in African contexts ([SIPRI, 2024](#)), more than half of low-income countries facing or at risk of debt distress ([IMF, 2023](#)), and youth unemployment in parts of sub-Saharan Africa exceeding 30 per cent ([ILO, 2023](#)), the disconnect between where crises are concentrated and where institutional authority is located is difficult to justify. In this context, geographic balance is a condition for the UN's capacity to mobilise collective action.

This same logic extends from geography to gender. Across UN and African regional frameworks, gender-balanced representation also forms part of the architecture of multilateral leadership, while peace agreements are up to 35 per cent more likely to endure when women participate meaningfully in negotiations ([Council on Foreign Relations, 2025](#)). Leadership trajectories shaped by peacekeeping, climate vulnerability, and development finance pressures strengthen political judgement on debt, climate, and development reform.

Reform will remain symbolic unless authority is redistributed beyond the top office into political, development, and peacekeeping portfolios, where mediation priorities, field mandates, and crisis responsiveness are actually shaped. That broader redistribution depends on a credible coalition pathway, and Tanzania's diplomatic standing within the African Union and the Group of 77, combined with regional rotation expectations, positions it to help build cross-regional support, particularly with Latin American states.

Policy Recommendations:

1 Institutionalise transparent and competitive nomination processes

Nomination processes should include public calls for candidates, clearly articulated evaluation criteria, and structured dialogues with nominees.

2 Operationalise CEDAW Article 8 through women’s advancement pathways

These obligations should translate into the active advancement of women candidates, balanced shortlists, and equitable leadership pathways.

3 Strengthen coordinated regional engagement through the African Union (AU) and the Group of 77 (G77)

Regional coordination should be strengthened to build unified, merit-based support for qualified candidates, including women.

4 Strengthen General Assembly oversight under Resolution 75/325

This should be strengthened through clear timelines, reporting requirements, and transparent candidate engagement processes.

5 Publicly frame leadership reform as a gender equality imperative

Leadership reform should publicly position the appointment of a woman Secretary-General as an expression of treaty commitments and longstanding multilateral reform advocacy.

6 Support for qualified women nominees

Member States should actively support and advance the nomination of qualified women candidates, while advocating for gender-balanced shortlists.

7 Call for gender- and geographically responsive leadership approaches

Candidates should commit to parity and geographic balance in senior political and peacekeeping appointments, embedding representation where crisis response and strategic direction are shaped.

8 Coordinate Tanzania’s multilateral leadership

Tanzania’s diplomatic positioning within the AU and the G77 should be leveraged to build coordinated, merit-based support for candidates who advance both gender equality and equitable geographic representation, strengthening legitimacy and reform outcomes.

Read the full policy brief here:



Advancing Transparency, Independence, and Gender-Inclusive Leadership in the 1 for 8 Billion Campaign for UN Secretary-General Selection

Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI, Pakistan)

Authors:

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Ayesha Naeem – Research Assistant at SDPI

Core Question:

Why do structural barriers and opaque power politics continue to prevent the appointment of the first woman UNSG despite strong evidence on women's multilateral leadership?

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.

Policy Findings:

1 **Structural barriers narrow women's pathways long before formal nomination begins**

Women's exclusion from the Secretary-General race is produced through unequal diplomatic pipelines and gendered scrutiny standards before candidacies become public.

2 **The "glass labyrinth" better explains the failure of the UN to appoint a woman Secretary-General than a simple glass-ceiling narrative**

Women's pathways are shaped by continuous and multifaceted resistance, including repeated competence tests, delayed progression, interrupted career pathways, and gendered portfolio segregation.

3 **Opaque power politics favour lowest-common-denominator candidates**

P5-dominated backroom bargaining continues to privilege politically safe and minimally disruptive candidates, limiting the emergence of reform-oriented and women candidates even where evidence of leadership effectiveness is strong.

4 **Renewal of the Secretary-General's mandate creates incentives for bureaucratic capture and network exclusion**

The possibility of a second term incentivises continuous appeasement of the P5, weakening institutional independence.

5 **National evidence shows that leadership viability and structural exclusion can coexist**

Interviews with key stakeholders in Pakistan point to continued proof burdens and patriarchal expectations that shape women's progression even in systems with nationally recognised women leaders.

6 **Isolated breakthroughs do not shift institutional culture without sustained senior-level critical mass**

The appointment of a single woman Secretary-General is unlikely to alter internal gender parity or organisational culture if wider senior appointments remain isolated.

7 **Pakistan's tenure as an E10 member creates a rare arithmetic and procedural opening for reform**

Pakistan's 2025–2026 Security Council seat aligns with the decisive phase of the selection timeline, creating a strategic opening to influence voting arithmetic, transparency reforms, and the political viability of the first woman Secretary-General.

Why this matters:

Women remain systematically underrepresented across the leadership pathways that produce credible UNSG contenders, from Permanent Representative roles to high-prestige portfolios in peace and security, trade, and economic governance. This structural filtering is combined with persistent competence penalties.

Even when highly qualified women reach the final stages, the decisive phase remains shaped by low-visibility bargaining among the P5. These practices continue to favour low-risk consensus profiles over candidates seen as more independent or reform-oriented. The 2016 race exposed this clearly: despite a record number of women candidates, opaque bargaining dynamics still filtered out disruptive leadership profiles and reproduced existing power hierarchies.

Pakistan's experience shows that national precedents of women in top office do not, on their own, shift these exclusionary dynamics. Interviews and institutional evidence point to a continued higher proof burden for women. Pakistan's 2025–2026 E10 tenure therefore creates a concrete opening: if coordinated effectively, the E10 can use its collective leverage to raise the political cost of weak consensus candidates and strengthen expectations around transparency, gender parity, and leadership standards in the 2026 selection.

Policy Recommendations:

1 **Make the appointment of the first woman Secretary-General a non-negotiable institutional objective**

Treat gender parity not as a preference, but as an operational necessity and a legal obligation under the UN Charter and CEDAW.

2 **Prohibit backroom deals over senior UN appointments in exchange for political support**

Member States should not trade senior UN posts for endorsements, veto restraint, or political backing, and candidates should reject entering such bargains.

3 Require the Security Council to recommend more than one final candidate to the General Assembly

The Security Council should forward two or more candidates, enabling the General Assembly to make a choice rather than merely endorsing a closed-door compromise.

4 Implement a single, non-renewable seven-year term

A single term would mitigate the political compromises and appeasement of the P5 that often shape first-term behaviour and distort independence ahead of renewal decisions.

5 Hold indicative General Assembly straw polls and disclose Security Council polling outcomes

The President of the General Assembly should organise indicative votes, allowing Member States to signal preferences before the Council finalises its choice.

6 Support consecutive and concurrent women's leadership

A single isolated female leader rarely changes gender parity or organisational culture. Member States must push for sustained women's leadership across senior appointments.

7 Move from nominating women to securing the appointment of a woman

Member States must sustain the political and diplomatic coordination needed to secure the appointment of a woman.

8 Restore and expand substantive civil society participation in the 2026 hearings

The UN should protect and strengthen the formal role of civil society in the hearings and selection resolutions.

9 Use Pakistan's E10 tenure to challenge P5 opacity during the decisive 2026 straw polls

Pakistan should use its 2025–2026 Security Council seat to coordinate with reform-oriented E10 members and push back against P5 opacity during the mid-2026 straw poll phase, leveraging its Women, Peace and Security credibility and peacekeeping leadership to strengthen the case for women's leadership as an operational necessity.

Read the full policy brief here:



From Electoral Representation to Global Executive Leadership:

Advocacy Lessons From Tunisia for Supporting the Election of a Woman Secretary-General

Solidar Tunisie, Tunisia

Author:

Khaled Mejri – Senior Research Fellow at Solidar Tunisie

Core Question:

What conditions shape women's access to leadership, and what lessons does the Tunisian experience offer for advancing the election of a woman as UNSG?

Abstract:

Using Tunisia's post-2011 political trajectory as a comparative lens, this brief examines how institutional design, political gatekeeping, socio-cultural norms, and resource constraints shape women's access to leadership. It argues that the absence of a woman Secretary-General is not incidental, but reflects structural barriers embedded in the rules, practices, and informal dynamics of the selection process. Drawing on electoral evidence and stakeholder analysis, the brief presents women's leadership as a matter of institutional reform and outlines strategies to strengthen political viability through coordinated advocacy.

Policy Findings:

1 **Institutional design shapes women's access to leadership by establishing the ceiling of possibilities for representation**

In Tunisia, parity-based list systems expanded women's representation, while their removal under individual competition sharply reduced it. A similar logic applies internationally, where selection rules and nomination frameworks define the boundaries of viable leadership.

2 **Political gatekeeping determines whether formal equality translates into meaningful access to leadership**

Control over candidate selection, ranking, and sponsorship shapes who becomes a viable contender. In Tunisia, parties mediated access to winnable positions; in the UN, Member States and diplomatic networks play the same gatekeeping role in nomination and political viability.

3 **Political viability is shaped upstream through nomination practices and early-stage filtering**

The ability to enter the selection process depends on sponsorship, signalling, and early political endorsement. In the UN context, nomination by Member States functions as the first institutional filter, shaping which candidates are recognised as viable before the process becomes visible.

4 **Socio-cultural norms continue to shape both participation and perceptions of leadership viability**

These operate through indirect and cumulative mechanisms that influence how competence, authority, and credibility are assessed, while also shaping women's willingness to enter competitive political processes.

5 **Economic constraints shape the competitiveness of women's candidacies**

Unequal access to funding, networks, and visibility limits the ability of women to sustain viable leadership trajectories under conditions of individual competition.

6 **Formal neutrality can reproduce inequality when underlying structural conditions remain unchanged**

Evaluation standards, credibility thresholds, and informal validation practices favour candidates with prior access to resources, networks, and visibility, allowing disparities to persist despite formally equal rules.

Why this matters:

The Tunisian case shows how quickly gains in women's leadership can be reversed when institutional safeguards are removed. Representation rose to nearly one third under parity-based list systems, then declined sharply to 15.6 per cent after the shift to individual-candidate competition. This reversal was not driven by changes in attitudes or qualifications, but by a re-design of the rules that makes access to resources, networks, and local political capital decisive.

The constraints are not only institutional. Evidence from a survey conducted by Solidar shows that 89 per cent of women would not consider running for office, while 90 per cent of candidates report lacking the means needed to compete, and 68 per cent believe their candidacy would be viable with greater financial support. These figures point to a system in which exclusion is not explicit, but cumulative.

This logic can be consistently extended to the UN context. Entry into the Secretary-General selection process depends on early political sponsorship. Viability is further shaped through informal assessments of credibility, coalition backing, and the ability to mobilise support across diplomatic networks. Without addressing how viability is constructed at these stages, formal openness risks producing symbolic inclusion rather than real competition. What is at stake in the 2026 selection is whether the process can generate leadership with the authority, legitimacy, and coalition backing required to respond to increasingly complex global crises.

Policy Recommendations:

1 Member States should commit early to gender-inclusive and cross-regional nomination practices

Member States should identify and advance qualified women candidates early in the nomination cycle. Joint and cross-national nominations can reduce domestic bottlenecks and widen access.

2 Move from formal neutrality to equity-oriented process design

The selection process should be redesigned to address opacity, veto concentration, informal sponsorship circuits, and leadership norms that advantage traditional candidate profiles.

3 Civil society coalitions should build a durable narrative and support ecosystem

These actors should build an ecosystem combining policy expertise, strategic communications, diplomatic outreach, media engagement, and credible endorsements.

4 Advocacy coalitions should reduce dependence on opaque brokerage

Collective efforts should develop transparent systems of support that reduce reliance on patronage and informal brokerage.

5 Advocacy coalitions should adopt stakeholder mapping and progress indicators as core political tools

Stakeholder mapping should classify Member States, regional blocs, and key actors by support and influence. Progress should be tracked through concrete indicators, including public endorsements, state support for a woman Secretary-General, coalition diversity, candidate visibility, uptake in diplomatic discourse, and use of joint nominations.

6 Link the demand to broader debates on legitimacy and representativeness in global governance

The election of a woman Secretary-General should be framed as part of strengthening legitimacy, representativeness, and institutional effectiveness. This should connect to wider debates on leadership diversity, institutional credibility, and the requirements for effective global leadership.

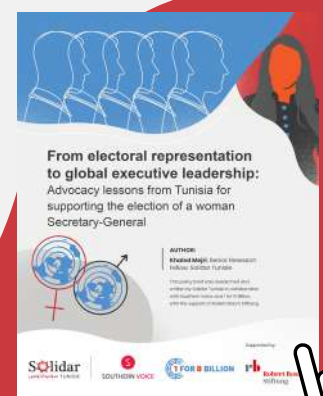
7 Build early momentum through competence-based visibility

Advocacy should focus on sustained visibility of credible women candidates based on competence, not symbolic urgency. Momentum-building should begin early and be maintained throughout the process.

8 Maintain direct leverage with gatekeepers at decisive stages

Public visibility should be linked to diplomatic engagement that influences nomination decisions and coalition formation. This requires sustained interaction with Member States, regional groups, diplomatic brokers, and influential multilateral actors.

Read the full policy brief here:



About the Campaign Partners

CIPPEC

Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth (CIPPEC, Argentina)

CIPPEC is an independent, non-profit think tank based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It improves public policy through research, analysis, and engagement with government, civil society, and the private sector. Its work focuses on areas such as democratic institutions, public management, and social and economic development. In this report, CIPPEC contributes a strong focus on transparency, institutional design, and the role of inclusive processes in strengthening legitimacy in leadership selection.



Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD, Bangladesh)

The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) is an independent think tank based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. It conducts research, policy analysis, and dialogue to support inclusive and evidence-based policymaking. Its work focuses on issues such as economic development, governance, and social inclusion, with a strong emphasis on engaging stakeholders across government, civil society, and the private sector. In this report, CPD contributes a perspective grounded in national experience of development pressures, crisis response, and gender representation, informing how leadership is assessed in practice.



Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF, Tanzania)

The Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF) is a non-profit policy research think tank based in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. It conducts research and provides policy analysis to support evidence-based decision-making on economic and social development. Its work focuses on areas such as public policy, governance, and development, incorporating a regional perspective that engages national and continental priorities. In this report, ESRF contributes

an analysis linking geographic and gender representation to institutional credibility by drawing on the alignment between where global challenges are concentrated and where authority is exercised.



Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI, Pakistan)

The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (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.



Solidar Tunisie (Solidar, Tunisia)

Solidar Tunisie is a non-governmental think tank based in Tunisia that promotes social and economic inclusion through programmes supporting employment, entrepreneurship, and local development. Its activities involve public institutions, civil society actors, and local stakeholders in addressing structural barriers to opportunity. In this report, Solidar Tunisie draws on its national experience to highlight how structural barriers shape women's access to leadership positions, thereby contributing to broader discussions on access to power within global governance frameworks.



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