



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

Presented by

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1. The 1 for 8 Billion

- ❑ 1 for 8 Billion is a global campaign, officially launched in 2014, that advocates for a transparent, inclusive, merit-based, and gender-equal process to select the UN Secretary-General



1.1 Overview of the Campaign

Steering Committee

CIVICUS
Plataforma CIPÓ
Southern Voice
UNA-UK
WomanSG
GQUAL.

Campaign Partners

Solidar Tunisia

Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF), Tanzania

CIPPEC, Argentina

Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh

Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Pakistan

Figure: UNSG Selection Process



- There is no systematic, transparent reporting throughout the process beyond the publication of candidates' names/vision statements
- Candidates can be put forward at the last minute, leaving no time for scrutiny
- The candidate selection process is controlled by the most powerful countries
- The recommended candidate to the GA is usually the result of secret bargaining among the five permanent members of the Council, subject to their individual vetoes
- Thus, the permanent five members can choose candidates that suit their short-term interests
- **No woman has ever held the post**



1.2 The Issue

- A process that is open, inclusive, and merit-based
- A process that sets out formal selection criteria and qualifications, aligns with modern practices, and exemplifies the UN's ideals
- A process that meets the highest standards of transparency and accountability that UN Member States and civil society have been demanding for years
- A process grounded in best practices in equality and diversity
- A process that provides meaningful involvement from all Member States, appropriate input from civil society, and that matches the standards of other high-level international appointments



1.3 What the Campaign Advocates For

1.4 Official Candidates for the Next UN Secretary General



Michelle Bachelet

Country: Chile

Nominated: 2 February 2026

Nominated by: Brazil and Mexico

Role: Former President of Chile, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights



María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés

Country: Ecuador

Nominated: 11 May 2026

Nominated by: Antigua and Barbuda

Role: Former president of the UN General Assembly



Rafael Grossi

Country: Argentina

Nominated: 26 November 2025

Nominated by: Argentina

Role: Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency



Rebeca Grynspan

Country: Costa Rica

Nominated: 3 March 2026

Nominated by: Costa Rica

Role: Secretary-General of the UN Conference on Trade and Development and former Vice President of Costa Rica



Carolyn Rodrigues Birkett

Country: Guyana

Nominated: 15 June 2026

Nominated by: Guyana

Role: Permanent Representative of Guyana to the United Nations



Macky Sall

Country: Senegal

Nominated: 2 March 2026

Nominated by: Burundi

Role: Former President of Senegal

2. Background of the Study

2.1 About the Study

- As part of this campaign, CPD's policy brief explores the kind of UN leadership the future requires amid geopolitical fragmentation and humanitarian crises
- It uses Bangladesh as an analytical lens to examine patterns of gender underrepresentation in UN leadership and advocates for a woman Secretary-General
- It draws on direct consultations with CSOs in Bangladesh to reassess expectations for the next UN Secretary-General by documenting stakeholder perspectives
- It argues that future UN reform should focus not only on creating opportunities to appoint a woman as Secretary-General but also on fostering the conditions necessary for capable, inclusive, and effective leadership to emerge



2.2 Underrepresentation of Women within the UN System

Only 5 women served as UN General Assembly President since 1946

Women have held only ~7% of Permanent Representative roles at the United Nations since 1947.

73 countries have never appointed a woman as their Permanent Representative

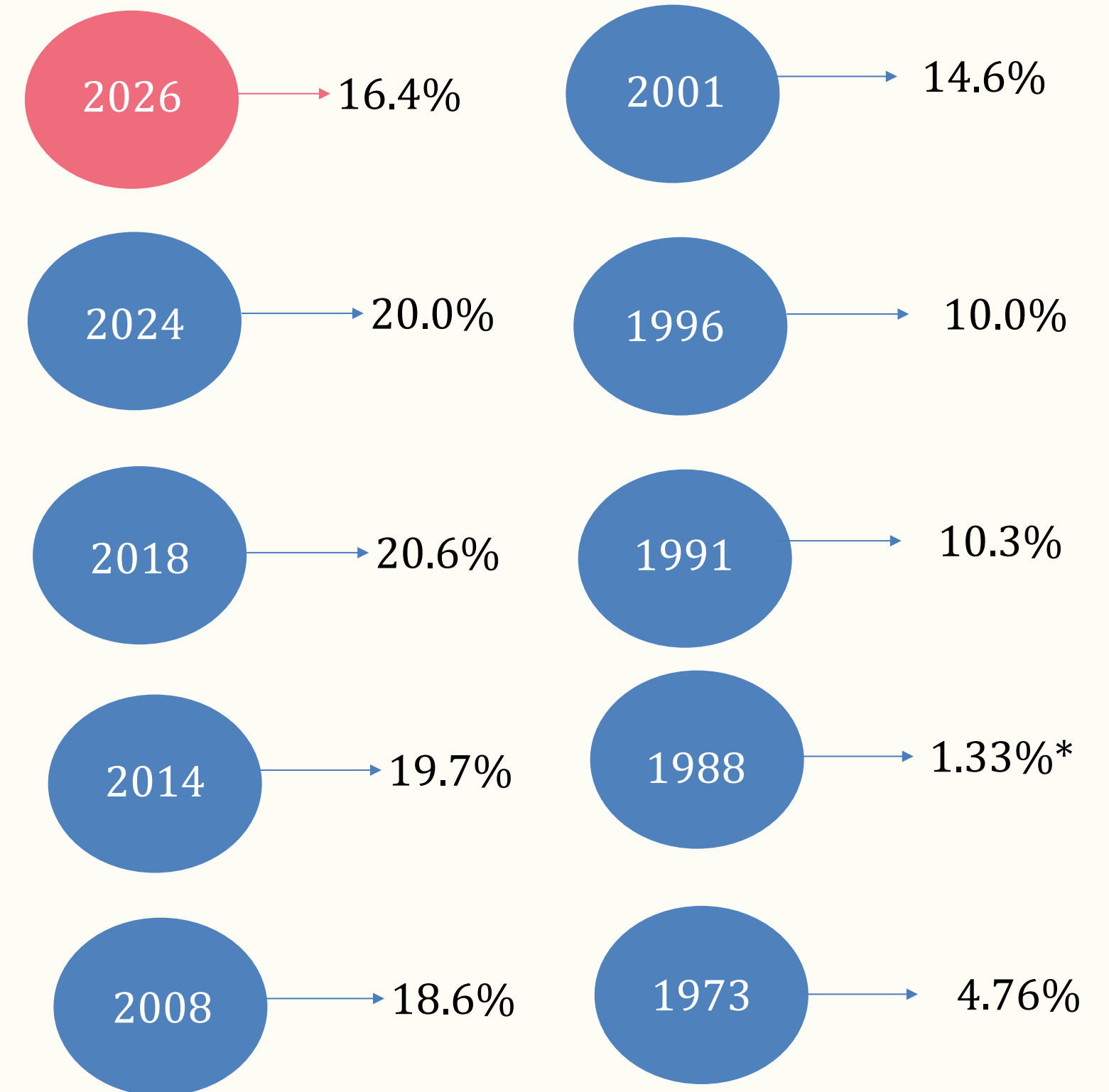
Women continue to be concentrated in junior and mid-level positions

3. Bangladesh as an Analytical Lens

3.1 Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh is Limited

- Similar to the UN System, women's representation in Bangladesh's governance remains low
- In Bangladesh, women's representation remains limited despite long-standing female leadership at the top
- Historically, women have held less than 22% of parliamentary seats, with the majority occupying reserved seats rather than being directly elected
- In 2026, women held 16.4% of parliamentary representation, with less than one-fourth of the total seats directly elected (7.3%)

Figure: Proportion of seats held by women in the Bangladesh National Parliament



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)

Note: *excluding the 30 reserved seats for women; data unavailable for the national elections held in 1986 and 1979.

3.2 Barriers to Political Women's Leadership in Bangladesh



- Women's political participation remains concentrated at elite levels, with limited presence at grassroots and mid-level leadership
- Research found that women's participation is heavily influenced by wealth, education and political loyalty
- Participation is often linked to family political legacy
- Reserved seats increase numbers but limit direct electoral legitimacy
- Women often operate within unsupportive political environments that limit their effectiveness and influence
- Senior-level representation remains low, restricting women's ability to shape key policy and decision-making processes
- Overall, women's participation reflects symbolic inclusion rather than substantive influence in governance

3.3 Beyond Symbolic Inclusion: Gender and Leadership Gaps in Governance

- Bangladesh's experience shows that female leadership at the top does not automatically ensure broader gender equality
- Women remain underrepresented in mid-level and grassroots governance, with limited decision-making power
- Top leaders often emerged as party figures rather than representatives of a wider women's movement, leading to a mixed impact on empowerment
- Symbolic representation can create a façade of progress without real structural change
- While gender inclusivity in leadership is vital, it still does not equate to better governance, accountability, or institutional effectiveness
- Ongoing challenges include inequality, corruption, economic pressures, climate vulnerability, and humanitarian crises

Key Message

- Gender representation is necessary but not sufficient
- Requires institutional reform, accountability, and inclusive governance

Implication for the UN

- A woman Secretary-General is important, but equity must be institutionalised across all levels
- Essential for stronger accountability, transparency, and global human rights protection

3.4 CSO Perspectives on UN Leadership & Gender Bias

- Civil society organisations in Bangladesh highlight gender imbalance in UN leadership, shaped by institutional norms favouring male candidates
- The nomination stage is a key barrier, as member states often put forward male candidates, limiting the pool of women leaders
- Standards of “merit” are applied inconsistently, with greater scrutiny often placed on female candidates
- Structural and political barriers, including limited visibility, credibility, and gender stereotypes, restrict women’s access to top leadership roles.
- Women leaders are often perceived as less capable in diplomacy, affecting their chances of selection
- Greater gender parity requires proactive nomination and support of qualified women by member states



3.5 Expectations for Inclusive & Effective Leadership

- Appointing a female UN Secretary-General would signal commitment to gender equality, but gender alone does not ensure effective leadership
- CSOs emphasise leadership qualities such as accountability, transparency, strategic decision-making, and inclusivity
- Effective leaders must represent diverse interests, build consensus, and respond constructively to feedback
- Bangladesh's experience shows symbolic female leadership does not always ensure inclusive governance
- Mechanisms like quotas and institutional reforms can improve representation but must ensure real influence, not just numbers
- The UN should prioritise leaders who can address global challenges, protect vulnerable groups, and promote ethical, inclusive systems
- Creating a gender-supportive institutional environment is essential to sustain women's leadership



3.6 Expectations for the Next UNSG: Perspectives from Bangladesh

- The next UN Secretary-General should strengthen the UN's role in global peacebuilding and conflict resolution
- CSOs in Bangladesh expect a stronger focus on institutional credibility, effectiveness, and coordinated global action
- The UN's humanitarian role is vital, but its impact is often limited by dependence on member state consent
- Bangladesh is a major contributor to UN peacekeeping, with 1,63,887 personnel deployed across 40 countries and 54 missions since 1948
- Despite this contribution, challenges like the Rohingya crisis highlight limits in UN-led repatriation efforts, requiring stronger diplomatic engagement with Myanmar
- Future leadership should prioritise inclusive diplomacy to ensure safe, voluntary, and sustainable refugee return solutions
- The UNSG must also address interconnected global challenges such as conflict, climate change, and instability, particularly affecting the Global South
- Stronger UN engagement is needed in Bangladesh to support gender-based violence prevention and climate resilience

4. Way Forward

4.1 Conclusion

- Achieving a female UN Secretary-General requires collective action from global civil society, including CSOs in Bangladesh
- CSOs from the Global South currently have limited formal influence in the UNSG selection process, but can strengthen advocacy efforts
- In a context of rising geopolitical tensions, the UN needs leadership capable of advancing global peace and stability
- Despite previous unsuccessful attempts, continued advocacy remains essential as the process is highly political in nature
- The UNSG selection should prioritise a leader who can address complex global challenges and uphold the UN's core mandate



4.2 Recommendations

- CSOs from the Global South should engage with governments, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to advocate for nominating qualified female candidates
- Member states should actively nominate and support competent women leaders committed to inclusive global governance
- The UNSG selection process should be made more transparent, merit-based, and less influenced by powerful states
- Reducing political and financial imbalances within the UN can support fairer and more impartial decision-making
- Leadership selection should prioritise the representation of diverse and marginalised perspectives
- Women should be promoted to senior diplomatic positions in the UN system to increase visibility and leadership readiness
- Similar to Bangladesh, the UN system can also consider gender quotas or reserved positions to improve women's representation in leadership roles



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