

## Women's Imprint in Multilateralism

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### Executive Summary

- ▶ Since the advent of modern multilateralism, the contribution of women to the development of global governance has grown significantly. This article examines the history of women's participation in international diplomacy, highlights their achievements and strategies, and provides concrete examples of successful initiatives in strengthening gender equality and the role of women.

As the historian Yuval Noah Harari emphasized, the greatest political and social revolution of the last hundred years was the feminist revolution, which – in a peaceful and non-violent manner – altered the dynamics between men and women that had not previously changed for thousands of years. This revolution – or, rather, evolution – also took place in international governance.

Indeed, the world of international politics had long been an exclusive area of male dominance. It is only in the 20th century that a gradual evolution of the gender perspective was observed. While 100 years ago women's participation in international affairs was far from being a widely accepted phenomenon, nowadays it becomes increasingly rare to have no women at the decision-making table, even if full equality in representation remains yet a goal to reach. We owe this transformation to many outstanding women, whose path, though filled with challenges and resistance, led them to change the world through multilateralism.

### Women at the League of Nations

The establishment of the League of Nations marked a turning point in the process of institutionalizing multilateralism. The League was the first global international organization created to maintain peace and promote cooperation between countries. Women

seized the opportunity of such a new global cooperation framework to voice their legitimate issues at the global level, which, in turn, influenced the advancement of women at the national level. As the first women's international organizations began to emerge at the turn of the XX century and during the First World War, women empowered themselves through these new forms of inter-governmental cooperation.

When governments gathered at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 to establish the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO), women's international organizations – notably the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the International Women's Suffrage Alliance and the International Council of Women - were present to make suggestions regarding the Covenant of the League of Nations and to prevent the exclusion of women from the provisions and decisions. Through the development of "The Women's Charter", they proposed that the League should promote universal suffrage in Member States, take measures to acknowledge the right of a woman married to a foreigner to retain her nationality, or work to abolish international sale of women and children. They also called for the creation of an international education and health bureau, and the control and reduction of armaments.

Based on these proposals, the Covenant of the



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League of Nations declared that Member States should promote humane conditions of labour for men, women and children as well as prevent trafficking in women and children. It also included provisions that all positions in the League of Nations, including the secretariat, should be open equally to men and women. At the same time, during the process of the ILO constitution drafting, women called for an end to child labour, support for social insurance, pensions and maternity benefits, and equal pay for equal work for women and men, among other things.

After the founding of the League of Nations and the ILO, women's organizations contributed to the work of the intergovernmental organizations and campaigned throughout the 1920s and 1930s to ensure, among other things, that women and their rights would not be neglected.

## Women at the early days of the United Nations

When the United Nations was created 76 years ago, the topic of gender equality in international politics was still quite marginal and the presence of both genders at the negotiating table was rare. Male delegates dominated at the San Francisco conference in 1945 where the United Nations Charter was signed. Out of 850 delegates, only four women signed the Charter. It is thanks to them and to the few women delegates and advisors that the resistance of many was overcome to ensure that an explicit reference to the equality between women and men be affirmed in the preamble of the Charter as follows: "We the Peoples of the United Nations determined (...) to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small (...)". Furthermore, Article 8 of the Charter affirmed that "The United Nations shall place no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate in any capacity and under conditions of equality in its principal and subsidiary organs". In addition, four different Articles - 1(3), 13(3), 55(3) and 76(3) - in the Charter established some fundamental principles "without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion".

These outstanding gains opened the door to women for shaping the global governance and were achieved notably by Latin American female delegates - Bertha Lutz of Brazil, Isabel de Vidal of Uruguay, Amália Caballero de Castillo Ledón of Mexico and Minerva Bernardino of the Dominican Republic, who fought for the inclusion of the word "women" in the preamble to the Charter, along with Jessie Street of Australia, who

advocated for the inclusion of gender as a ground for prohibition of discrimination. This document became the first international agreement to recognize the equal rights of men and women. Minerva Bernardino further proposed the creation of a special commission of women to analyze the legal status of women around the world and to better understand the inequalities they had to combat.

Four of the women delegates - Minerva Bernardino, Bertha Lutz, Wu Yi-Fang of China and Virginia Gildersleeve of the United States - were among the 160 signatories of the UN Charter as representatives of their governments. Importantly, out of the 50 countries represented at the Conference, women had voting rights in only 30. It is hard to imagine the difficulties these three courageous women were facing while promoting the principle of gender equality in such a male-dominated assembly.

## Women at the United Nations: strengthened participation

During the first session of the United Nations General Assembly in 1946 in London, 18 women delegates and advisers from 11 Member States wrote an Open Letter to the women of the world calling upon them to strive for full participation in "the life and responsibilities of their countries and of the world community" as a common objective toward which the women of the world should assist one another. This powerful letter also called on governments to encourage women "to take a more conscious part in national and international affairs, and on women to come forward and share in the work of peace and reconstruction as they did in the war and resistance".

By investing themselves in multilateralism, women sought to expand their influence at the international stage to change the conditions for women through international legal frameworks and new practices. This, in turn, could facilitate women's participation in decision-making processes at the local and national levels in their countries, and further encourage and enable more women to take part in international governance.

Women's participation in global governance was made easier thanks to the recognition by the UN Member States of the importance of collaboration with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the possibility for NGOs to obtain consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and to engage directly with the UN intergovernmental bodies. Women's organizations actively used this opportunity to bring issues of concern to the attention of the international community.



## Commission on the Status of Women

The participation of women and women's organizations was most notable in the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), established in 1946 as the principal global intergovernmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Even if it was an intergovernmental structure, many governments had appointed as their representatives, women who were militants in their own countries. From the beginning of its work, the body also had direct contacts with women's international NGOs, which enriched the substantive work of the Commission and served as a training ground for women's progress on the world's political stage.

Moreover, women influenced not only those multilateral structures that dealt directly with their own causes, but strived to incorporate so-called "women's issues" into other international normative frameworks, thus legally expanding the principles of equality.

## Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 was a breakthrough in the history of human rights as it set a common and universal standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations - irrespective of race, color, gender, language, faith or opinion. The Declaration paved the way for the adoption of more than seventy human rights treaties. The text of the Declaration was developed in the wake of the atrocities of World War II and the widespread lack of respect for human rights. The UN Commission on Human Rights was tasked with drafting the Declaration, but its content was also enriched by several other UN bodies as well as NGOs.

Here again, women played a crucial role in the development of this important instrument. Eleanor Roosevelt, who was the Chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights, managed to steer the drafting process toward its successful completion despite a divided and politically difficult environment. Other women also played a great part in shaping the document. Hansa Meta of India is widely credited for making a significant change in Article 1 of the Declaration by replacing the word "men" with the neutral word "human beings." Minerva Bernardino successfully argued for inclusion of the term "the equality of men and women" in the preamble of the Declaration. Begum Shaista Ikramullah of Pakistan emphasized freedom, equality and choice by championing Article 16 on equal rights in marriage as

a way to combat child marriage and forced marriage.

## More focus on non-discrimination and women's participation

As the UN membership expanded and women gained more prominence in international governance through participation in several World Conferences in the 1970s as well as World Conferences on Women in the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in the Beijing Conference and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action for Equality, Development and Peace, the discourse and attitudes towards women's participation started changing. From the initial focus as being beneficiaries and receivers of international attention and support, women started taking more central and critical role as actors in the implementation of the UN goals, even if issues such as violence against women or reproductive rights remained unresolved through international frameworks and equal participation of women in global governance was still far from being achieved.

The adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979 was another important achievement in combating discrimination and targeting equal participation of women.

The inclusion of women's perspectives accelerated further when in 1997, ECOSOC adopted a decision to mainstream the gender perspectives into all policies and programmes of the United Nations system. Furthermore, the creation of several structures charged with the advancement of women's perspectives and achieving gender equality, contributed to the advancement of women. Currently, UN Women - the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women - brings together various mandates and resources to accelerate the Organization's goals on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Furthermore, women's indispensable role in efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals was recognized at the highest level during the UN World Summit held in New York in 2005.

Also, the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, adopted in 2000, affirmed for the first time the importance of women's participation, especially at decision-making level, in conflict resolution, peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction. Studies show that there is a 35 per cent greater chance of peace agreements lasting 15 years when women participate in United Nations-led peace processes. Similarly, peace agreements



brokered with the involvement of women are more likely to be gender-responsive and sustainable as well as to enhance civil society participation and ensure broader community acceptance.

In the era of modern multilateralism, equal participation of women in decision making has become the norm – even if the full equality between women and men is yet to be achieved. Women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming formed a paradigm shift allowing for a transformational change of patriarchal cultures and greater participation of women in national politics and governments, which, in turn resulted in greater participation of women in the United Nations, both as staff members and as government delegates.

## Gender parity in the United Nations system

Achieving gender parity in the United Nations system has been an objective since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration, which called for women to hold 50 per cent of professional, managerial and decision-making positions at the UN by the year 2000, currently making the achievement of this goal 21 years overdue. It is not until very recently that historical gains have been achieved in this area despite numerous past attempts.

In 2017, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who prioritized reaching gender parity in the UN system as one of his main objectives, launched a Gender Parity Strategy with the aim to create a more diverse, inclusive, gender-balanced United Nations with an overall target of reaching parity by 2028. To date, for the first time, gender parity has been reached at the most senior managers level of the UN Secretariat and among Resident Coordinators. The Organization also currently has the highest number in its history of women as Head and Deputy Head of Mission in peace operations. The most recent data indicates that 44.2 per cent of professional and higher-level staff in the UN system are women, up from 32.6 per cent reported in 1995 and from 37.1% reported in 2005. The significant progress is evident, even if it remains uneven, and further efforts are needed to achieve the targets.

Women have increasingly become part of the UN peacekeeping family – making operations more effective and impactful. In all fields of peacekeeping, women peacekeepers have proven that they can perform the same roles, to the same standards and under the same difficult conditions, as their male counterparts. Women peacekeepers serve as powerful mentors and role models for women and girls in post-conflict settings in host communities.

While in 1993, women made up only 1% of deployed uniformed personnel, in 2020 women constituted 4.8% of military contingents and 10.9% of formed police units in UN Peacekeeping missions. Although a gradual increase in the number of female peacekeepers takes place, we still need to defy a common stereotype that conflict mediation and peace negotiations is an exclusive work for men.

At the United Nations Office at Geneva (UN Geneva), by pursuing the implementation of our gender policy, significant progress has been made in approaching gender parity, with 48% of women currently working across all professional levels as compared to 44% - with only 38.8% at senior levels - in 2015. This progress has been achieved through the selection process based on merit rather than on “preferential treatment”. This course of action is important for the long-term success of reaching parity while maintaining merit-based professional balance.

## Women as delegates in intergovernmental meetings

Despite considerable progress, globally women remain underrepresented in decision-making in all fields and at all levels. Only 22 countries currently have a woman as Head of State or Government; 119 countries have never had a woman leader. Globally, only 21 per cent of Ministers are women, and women parliamentarians make up less than 25 per cent of national legislators, a slow increase from 11.3 per cent in 1995.

National decision-making demographics, particularly in senior positions, are mirrored in a similar gender imbalance at the international level. Only four women have served as President of the United Nations General Assembly in the past 75 sessions. There has never been a woman UN Secretary-General. Women are also underrepresented among permanent representatives to the United Nations, currently at only 29 per cent in Geneva, although an increase from 27 per cent in 2016.

Government delegations to international meetings rarely have equal numbers of women and men, and heads of delegations are predominantly men. A study conducted for the first time by UN Women and the International Gender Champions in 2017 looked closely at the number of women in delegations to governing bodies of Geneva-based international organizations and found that the participation of women in meetings stagnated at around 30 per cent. The study further found that women also remained underrepresented on panels, especially those on technical and security-related topics, with the average



panel consisting of 2.5 female and 3.75 male panelists, signifying that women continued to face challenges in gaining recognition for their expertise.

## The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Gender stereotypes are especially persistent and rooted in traditional mindsets of our societies. However, practice shows that deeply entrenched ideas about female leadership can also change.

In 2015, by adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, all UN Member States recognized that gender equality was not only a fundamental human right, but also an essential foundation for sustainable peace and development. In this context, it is important to highlight the leadership role of the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations Amina J. Mohammed, at the time the Special Adviser to former Secretary-General with the responsibility for post-2015 development planning. She led the process that resulted in global agreement around the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the creation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Gender equality is both an objective and a driver of sustainable development. It is key to building safe, peaceful, healthy, and prosperous communities, and to achieving not only Goal 5, but all the Sustainable Development Goals. Specifically, target 5.5 aims at ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. The barriers to achieving gender equality in our societies such as legal discrimination, unfair social norms and attitudes and low levels of political participation, are therefore severely jeopardizing our chances to realize the 2030 Agenda.

## Women and gender equality in International Geneva

International Geneva - a main diplomatic centre and a key operational hub of the UN system - plays an important role in global efforts to maintain international peace and security, promote human rights and advance sustainable development. It comprises a unique ecosystem of near universal representation of Member States, numerous intergovernmental organizations, civil society organizations, academia, the private sector, and individuals at the forefront of technological innovation, trade, development and humanitarian assistance, health, peace-building and environmental

protection. International Geneva is known for designing and testing collaborative and innovative solutions in a multilateral context.

UN Geneva plays a leading role in fostering and enabling collaboration with and among Member States and other actors as well as in supporting intergovernmental processes and multilateral diplomacy, including cultural diplomacy. Many high-level delegations gather at UN Geneva every year to participate in bilateral exchanges, meetings and conferences. Among them are the meetings of important UN mechanisms such as the Human Rights Council. In this context, it needs to be stressed that during the time of COVID-19, when UN conferences came under strain as participants could not physically gather in conference rooms at the Palais des Nations and the hybrid conferencing was still a novelty, it was under the outstanding leadership of the Austrian Permanent Representative Ambassador Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger, President of the Human Rights Council, that the Council could complete its programme of work for 2020. Her successor, Fijian Ambassador Nazhat Shameem Khan, assumed the presidency of the Council in 2021 and has started skillfully steering the Human Rights Council's work while the COVID-19 continued challenging the global governance system.

International Geneva has led by example in instituting innovative approaches to promoting gender equality and women's participation and leadership. One success story is the International Gender Champions leadership network that brings together female and male decision-makers determined to break down gender barriers and make gender equality a working reality. This collaborative initiative was launched in Geneva in 2015 by the former Director-General of UNOG, former US Ambassador to the UN in Geneva and the founder of the NGO "Women@TheTable". In just six years, the initiative has expanded to other multilateral hubs in New York, Vienna, Nairobi, Paris and The Hague. Over 400 International Gender Champions from international organizations, Member States, civil society and private sector entities have role modelled concrete and often joint actions to advance gender equality within their organizations and through programmatic work. All Champions also signed the Panel Parity Pledge to improve gender compositions of panel discussions, and it is now unthinkable for the international community in Geneva to have only-male or only-female panel discussions.

The UN has a responsibility to lead by example and demonstrate the core values of equality, human rights and non-discrimination through our actions. UN Geneva continues to make progress in transforming



our own organizational culture through various activities. Some examples include the development of our own policy on gender equality, staff surveys to measure progress, the campaign against casual sexism, the programmes to strengthen career development and leadership skills for female professionals, flexible working arrangements, the Code of Conduct to prevent harassment at official meetings, and the construction of a second breastfeeding room.

At UN Geneva, we support and organize events and exhibitions to raise awareness about the contribution of many outstanding women to multilateralism and to challenge perceptions in the area of women's participation and leadership, such as the most recent photo exhibition, launched on 1 May 2021, International Workers' Day, entitled "Not a Woman's Job?", with the aim to acknowledge and support women across the globe in professions traditionally associated with a 'man's world', such as film makers, airline pilots, or football referees. In addition, research guides on gender equality and the participation of women developed by the UN Library & Archives Geneva facilitate access to information for researchers, including in digital form.

### Women in multilateralism of the future

Despite the considerable progress achieved over the last decades, SDG 5 – achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls – is far from being attained, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic threaten to reverse the gains made thus far. Women and girls are the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic's social isolation, barriers in educational opportunities and economic fallout, which hampers their participation and leadership at all levels.

As the battle against COVID-19 continues, the international community needs to put women and girls at the centre of recovery efforts, which would

result in better and more sustainable outcomes for all and would place the world back on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

At the global level, the UN Secretary-General recently called on leaders in all sectors to step up efforts and undertake five transformative actions to achieve gender equality: to repeal all discriminatory laws and enact positive measures; to take steps for equal representation in all sectors; to support women's economic inclusion; to address violence against women and girls; and to support and empower young women. The combination of these actions at all levels would strengthen women's representation, participation and leadership, both nationally and internationally, and empower the new type of multilateralism.

At the start of this year, the UN Secretary-General outlined ten priorities to secure the well-being of people, economies, societies and our planet, and called for a reset for the 21st century that would entail a more inclusive, more networked multilateralism and a fairer world order. The global governance structure is gradually transforming into a more complex, multi-stakeholder participatory system, with governments at the core, but all other relevant actors participating, including businesses and civil society, youth groups and women's associations, academia and the scientific community, city administrations and regional organizations. Each actor brings its own strengths and innovative solutions to the engine of multilateralism, and women also have a key role to play in this context. It is in our joint interests to strengthen our global collective efforts towards gender equality so that more women could play their part in the global progress nationally and internationally. Gender equality and women's full participation and leadership in decision-making are fundamental to strengthening the multilateral system of the future.



## Further reading

- *Feminism is the greatest revolution of the 21st century*, Yuval Noah Harari <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/J0xPznhR1k9HYiWngC8rjP/Feminism-is-the-greatest-revolution-of-the-21st-century-say.html>
- *Women and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Routledge Research in Gender and History) 1st Edition, Rebecca Adami, 2018
- "Women and the UN Charter" project, Fatima Sator and Elise Dietrichson, SOAS University of London
- *Shaping the International Agenda: Raising Women's Voices in Intergovernmental Forums*, UN Women and International Gender Champions Geneva, March 2017
- *The unfinished story of women and the United Nations*, Hilikka Pietilä, United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service, 2007
- United Nations: [www.un.org](http://www.un.org)
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)
- UN Women: [www.unwomen.org](http://www.unwomen.org)
- United Nations Office at Geneva: [www.ungeneva.org](http://www.ungeneva.org)
- *Women and Global Diplomacy: From Peace Movements to the United Nations* Research Guide, UN Geneva Library Resources
- *Women and Gender Equality*, Research Guide, UN Geneva Library Resources
- *Multi-what? A short guide on multilateralism and its role in our daily lives*, Perception Change Project, 2021
- Online photo exhibition "Not a Woman's Job?" <https://sites.ungeneva.org/not-a-womans-job/>
- International Gender Champions initiative: <https://genderchampions.com/>

## About the author

Tatiana Valovaya is the 13th Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva (UN Geneva) and the first woman to occupy this position. Ms. Valovaya has more than 35 years of experience in public service, diplomacy and journalism.

For further information please click:

<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/profiles/tatiana-valovaya>

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