How to Improve the Representation of Women at the UN

Based on the Secretary-General's report on the Improvement in the Status of Women in the United Nations System (A/76/115)

UN WOMEN

1995 — Beijing Declaration & Platform for Action - 50/50 gender balance at Professional level and above

2017 — Secretary-General's System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity - 50/50 gender balance at all levels and locations by 2028

2019 — 89% of entities had developed and updated entity-specific strategic plans to reach gender parity

During the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, 189 Member States unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In the Declaration, Member States agreed to strive for "equal responsibilities and equal opportunities and to the equal participation of women and men in all national, regional and international bodies and policy-making processes". Alongside the Declaration, the Platform for Action detailed strategic objectives and actions for the UN to reach gender balance "at the Professional level and above, by the year 2000". Over a quarter of a century later, that goal has not yet been met.

In 2017, the Secretary-General published his System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity, an urgent call for all entities to dedicate accelerated efforts to reach gender parity at all levels in the UN system by 2028. The urgent need to promote and attain gender parity was emphasized again in two of the key commitments in the Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda report of 2021, outlining a decade of action towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

UN Women is mandated to lead, coordinate and promote accountability of the UN system for women's equal representation. Every two years, UN Women prepares the Secretary-General's *report on the Improvement of the Status of Women* ('the report'). The report uses personnel statistics and an entity-wide survey to provide a comprehensive overview of the proportion of women appointments, advancements and separations. Tracking progress by entity over time enables stakeholders to pinpoint challenges, monitor the effectiveness of actions being taken, and provide evidence for advocacy. Findings are used to update UN entities and good practices are shared amongst a system-wide network of nearly 500 Gender Focal Points all over the world.

The latest report (A/76/115) shows improvements in the representation of women in the Professional and higher categories in the UN system, now at 45.3 per cent. Moreover, parity has been sustained among senior roles appointed by the Secretary-General, including Resident Coordinators and the Secretary-General's senior management group.
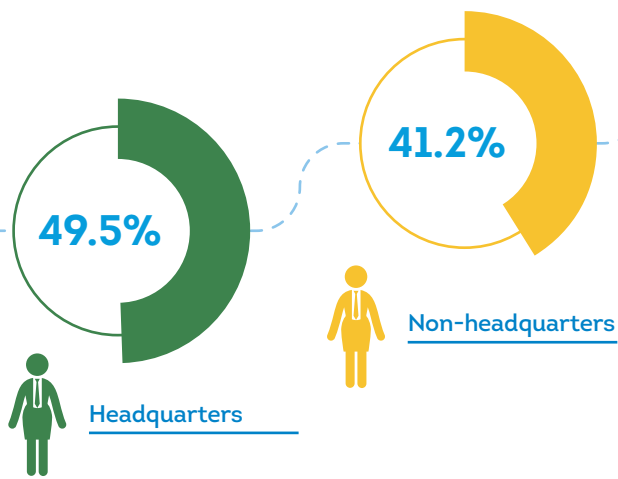
45.3% — Overall, P-1 to UG

51.4% — Representation of women among Resident Coordinators

49.5%

Headquarters

41.2%

Non-headquarters

However, despite these improvements, the data shows that overall progress is inconsistent and slow. From 2009 to 2019, average annual gains for Professional

and higher categories was only 0.5 per cent. Further, although parity was nearly reached at headquarters locations, progress at non-headquarters locations continued to trail headquarters locations at every level and with an 8.3 percentage point difference overall.

The report assesses impediments to reaching gender parity and highlights good practices of specific entities to achieve progress. The report also presents evidence-based recommendations aimed at assisting entities in the UN to achieve gender parity. Based on the recommendations of the report, the General Assembly adopted a resolution (A/RES/76/142) that guides future efforts for the advancement of women at the UN, with detailed language on the specific actions required of all entities in the UN system.

What are the barriers to equal representation?

The representation of women in the UN system overall is 45.3 per cent for grades P-1 to UG level, but there is an unevenness across grade levels. At the entry professional level (P-1), women are consistently overrepresented at 71.2 per cent, while at the more senior decision-making level (D-2), women represent only 37.7 per cent of staff on permanent, continuous and fixed-term appointments.

Respondents to a system-wide entity survey on the improvement in the status of women identified main impediments to achieving gender parity at the P-4 level and higher in the UN as follows:

- Inadequate career development for mid-level staff
- Challenges of retaining women due to organizational culture
- Low staff turnover and/or few openings for senior positions
- Inconsistent implementation of support for professional and personal life integration
- Low number of qualified applicants and/or inadequate outreach
- Lack of accountability for hiring decisions

P-1	P-2	P-3	P-4	P-5	D-1	D-2
71.2%	57.9%	46.9%	44.4%	39.0%	38.1%	37.7%

Junior to Senior
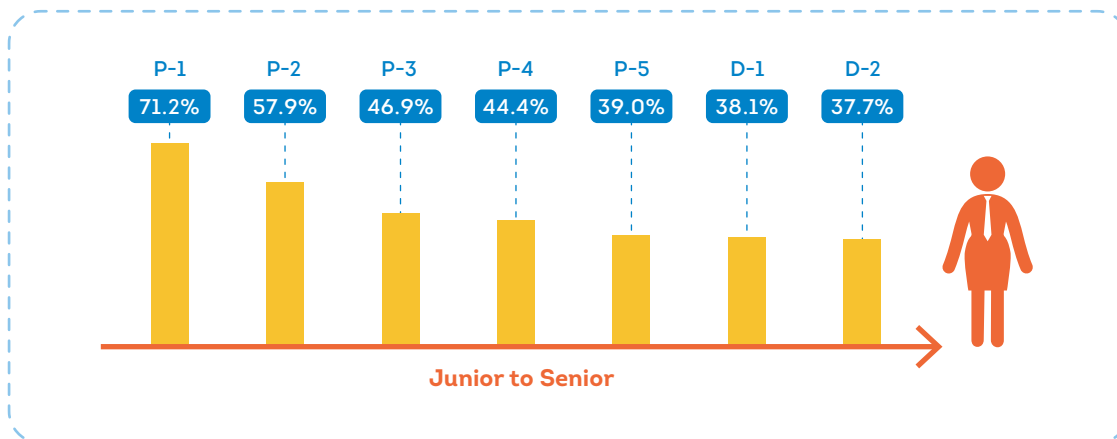
Many of these impediments are more palpable in male-dominated sectors such as peacekeeping, security and technology. These sectors experience persistent challenges to reach gender parity and require targeted interventions and solutions, especially for field environments. The UN Secretariat Gender Parity Dashboard and the UN System-wide Dashboard on Gender Parity show the representation of women and men by entity, and are available as an additional resource of reference for heads of entities and hiring managers during the recruitment process.

Ensuring that job descriptions use gender-inclusive language, re-examining mandatory requirements and creating targeted talent pools of qualified candidates with networking opportunities are some ways to broaden existing candidate pools and attract women graduates and professionals. One good practice to attract women candidates to apply for available positions is to employ inclusive messaging and feature gender diversity in communications, recruitment materials and vacancy announcements.

Unconscious bias training, especially for staff with hiring responsibilities, and forming interview panels that are gender-balanced are other ways to reduce implicit biases. Numerous entity-specific examples can be found in the report related to streamlining of requirements listed in vacancy announcements and deliberate outreach to specific talent pools to support women applicants for opportunities. To ensure all personnel feel respected and included in the workplace, it is important for organizational leaders to uphold standards of conduct and cultivate an environment that demonstrates zero tolerance to acts of misconduct such as harassment and discrimination.

Retention of mid-level women personnel has been a challenge for some entities, especially during pivotal changes in life stages. Entities should re-examine the family-friendliness of workplace policies to ensure appropriate support is available for all personnel, especially those with care responsibilities. Standardized parental leave has already been implemented in some entities, and onsite childcare and lactation spaces are needed for smoother staff reintegration following parental leave.

It is also integral to assess the availability and quality of formal career development opportunities and cater them to staff who do not already benefit from informal support networks. Leadership and mentoring programmes jointly organized by multiple UN entities have had a positive impact on all participants, both mentees and mentors. One leadership programme called the Programme for Emerging Leaders (EMERGE) has led to a number of career advancements while mentorship programmes have fostered stronger connections through horizontal mentorship exchanges. The use of regular staff engagement surveys and leveraging survey results to inform follow-up action demonstrates organizational accountability to staff experiences. Moreover, conducting exit interviews to drive talent management efforts can be a critical step to better retain and develop talent. These forward-looking actions can help ensure a more gender-balanced and inclusive talent pipeline and identify gaps early on.

The report's entity-wide survey also included questions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the health and well-being of women personnel. 50 per cent of surveyed entities indicated that the global pandemic had a negative impact on gender parity progress. On one hand, it allowed an opportunity for organizational change such as telecommuting and virtual training opportunities. On the other hand, it exacerbated challenges for gender parity through recruitment freezes and competing priorities. Widespread closures of schools and childcare facilities also increased care responsibilities of parents, especially mothers and single mothers who often carried a disproportionate burden to juggle unpaid care and domestic work, according to research by UN Women.

5 Ways UN Entities Can Improve the Representation of Women

These recommendations originate from the Secretary-General's report **A/76/115** and General Assembly Resolution **76/142** as actions UN entities should take to advance efforts to achieve 50/50 gender balance at the UN.

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1. Strengthen accountability for gender parity and enabling environments. Specific actions include:

✓ Entity-wide and office-specific gender parity strategy implementation plans

✓ Temporary special measures in recruitment to increase the representation of women where parity has not yet been reached

✓ Leadership compacts in which leaders are held accountable to role model behaviors that create enabling working environments for personnel

✓ Add gender parity targets and indicators on creating enabling environments to annual workplans and performance appraisal systems for all personnel, especially managers and leaders in the field

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A/RES/76/142, para. 35. "*Requests* the Secretary-General to further accelerate his efforts to achieve the goal of **50/50 gender balance at all levels** throughout the United Nations system, **including in the field and in peacekeeping missions, with full respect for the principle of equitable geographical distribution**....and to ensure the implementation of measures with clear targets and timelines, including **temporary special measures**...policies and measures related to **creating enabling working environments, including for work-life balance**, and to prevent and **address all forms of discrimination, racism, harassment, including sexual harassment**, abuse of authority in the workplace and sexual exploitation and abuse...accelerate progress, and managerial and departmental **accountability**...through leadership compacts and performance appraisal systems, with respect to attaining gender parity within the shortest feasible period"

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2. Closely monitor the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on personnel, for example through undertaking regular anonymous surveys for all personnel. The questions should focus on health and well-being, and professional and personal life integration. The surveys should be analyzed with gender-disaggregated data and other relevant demographic information. The survey results should inform policy change in a timely manner.

A/RES/76/142, para. 36. *Requests* the entities of the United Nations to **closely monitor the impact** of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on **women personnel and their health and well-being**"

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3. Strengthen efforts to address sexual harassment by aligning with the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment. Specific actions include:

✓ Align policies with the **UN system Model Policy** on Sexual Harassment and implement the **Code of Conduct** to Prevent Harassment, Including Sexual Harassment, at UN System Events

✓ Implement a victim/survivor-centred approach, aligned with **Advancing a Common Understanding of a Victim-centred Approach to Sexual Harassment** within the Organizations of the United Nations System

✓ Strengthen accountability mechanisms, for example use the **Clear Check** Database to screen applicants and strengthen investigations with the help of the **Investigators' Manual**: **Investigation of Sexual Harassment Complaints**

A/RES/76/142, para. 37. "*Also requests* the entities of the United Nations to **strengthen efforts to prevent, address and eliminate sexual harassment**, in full alignment with the work of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment within the Organizations of the United Nations System, **apply a victim-centred approach** to all forms of misconduct, as well as encourage the implementation of **accountability mechanisms**"

4. Appoint and adequately resource Gender Focal Points and Focal Points for Women. Specific actions include:

✓ Appoint multiple Gender Focal Points of all genders

✓ Provide clear Terms of Reference

✓ Ensure sufficient time and financial resources to allow Focal Points to carry out their roles

✓ Provide Gender Focal Points with access to staff selection statistics and processes

✓ Systematically consult Gender Focal Points through regular meetings and communications, such as a standing agenda item during town halls

A/RES/76/142, para. 38. "*Calls upon* the entities of the United Nations system ... to continue to collaborate with UN Women and with the active support of system-wide gender focal points and to **provide sufficient financial and human resources** for organizational change and for overcoming identified **impediments to progress** on gender balance, including setbacks from the COVID-19 pandemic"

A/RES/76/142, para. 39. "*Requests* the entities of the United Nations, at both **headquarters and non-headquarters levels**, to continue to **appoint gender focal points to provide support** for the advancement of gender parity, led and coordinated by UN-Women"

5. Implement the Enabling Environment Guidelines for the United Nations System and the Field-specific Enabling Environment Guidelines in support of the Secretary-General's System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity. These guidelines provide further specific recommendations and good practice examples on areas including Recruitment, Standards of Conduct and Professional and Personal Life Integration.

A/RES/76/142, para. 38. "*Calls upon* the entities of the United Nations system to significantly increase their efforts towards achieving the goal of **50/50 gender balance in all locations**, including at the United Nations country team level....as outlined in the Secretary-General's System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity, as well as the recommendations contained in the **Enabling Environment Guidelines for the United Nations System** and the **Field-specific Enabling Environment Guidelines**"