

# Madam Secretary-General?

With pressure mounting for the next UN Secretary General to be a woman, is it too much to ask that she also be a feminist?

United Nations Secretary-General Ban ki-Moon's second (and last) five-year term expires on December 31st 2016. Roughly every ten years, the vexed question arises of how to identify a good leader for the job of the world's chief diplomat. This important process remains a mystery to the global public, and even to many within the UN. This time around a new factor is in play: unprecedented pressure to pick a woman for the job.

There are plenty of women with the experience and background – as diplomats, politicians, and international civil servants – to be selected. A civil society [Campaign to Elect a Woman UN Secretary-General](#) (of which I am a member) offers weekly profiles of women leaders from around the world who might be considered. Known in hashtag-speak as #she4SG, the campaign has highlighted the glaring and persistent gender imbalance in top UN leadership, and argues that, after more than 70 years and eight male SGs in a row, it is high time a woman is selected.

## Lack of clarity about the selection process

Determining whether any of the women who could be considered for the post possesses the requisite qualifications is difficult because the SG's job description is vague at best. At a minimum, the SG must oversee a sprawling bureaucracy and build consensus among UN member-states on how to overcome narrow national interests to advance the UN's three key objectives: maintaining international peace and security, promoting social and economic development, and securing respect for human rights. In theory, the SG should possess a demonstrated commitment to justice, equality, and the rule of law, as well as the charisma, courage, and diplomatic skill to realize a bold vision for a better world. But virtue and command power are not, in practice, the qualities chiefly valued. Inoffensiveness is.



United Nations hall of past and present Secretary Generals. Credit: Andrea Izzotti / Shutterstock.com

The most powerful UN member-states, who have an outside influence on the selection process, would prefer someone without particularly strong views or political attachments. The search for the lowest common denominator weeds out anyone who may have stood up and spoken out. And, since it is the UN, a candidate's region of origin matters. Because no SG has ever come from Eastern Europe, there is great pressure to select a candidate from that region.

Whoever is chosen must be acceptable to 9 out of 15 members of the Security Council, and to all five of the Council's permanent members – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States – each of which can veto any candidate.

Irritation at the choke-hold that this tiny set of countries, a freeze-frame of global power in the post World War II world, has over UN decision-making has fueled long-standing but slow-moving efforts to broaden the Security Council's membership and constrain use of the veto. In late 2015, the General Assembly passed a resolution demanding transparency in the process for nominating and selecting the next SG. It also [urged countries to put forward women candidates](#). Civil society groups are amplifying these demands. A campaign called '[1 for 7 Billion](#)', which brings together a wide range of human rights advocacy groups, calls for candidates to be made public and for selection criteria be made clear so that each candidate can be assessed by the General Assembly and the world at large.



The 'Step It Up' campaign for gender equality. Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown **A growing set of women candidates**

For the first time [official nominations have been publicly announced](#). To date, six Eastern European countries have made nominations. Three of these are women: Irina Bokova, a Bulgarian who heads UNESCO; Vesna Pusic, Deputy Speaker of Croatia's Parliament; and Natalia Gherman, Moldova's Foreign Minister. Gherman has stepped down from her official duties in order to focus full-time on her campaign for SG. Others are sure to be nominated. Kristalina Georgieva, currently Vice-President of the Commission of the European Union, has also been mentioned. Like Bokova, she too is Bulgarian, but nothing prevents a country from nominating more than one candidate.

Because there is no official rule on regional rotation of the Secretary-General's post, names from beyond Eastern Europe are circulating. Among the leading contenders is Helen Clark, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand (region-wise, a member of the UN's "Western Europe and Others Group"). For the past seven years, Clark has headed the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), a far larger agency than UNESCO. Another possibility, tantalizingly aired in the [New York Times](#) by a former communications aide to Kofi Annan, is German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose political difficulties at home may make her available sooner than originally thought. Latin America offers several possibilities: Rebecca Grynspan, Clark's deputy at UNDP and former vice president of Costa Rica; Alicia Barcena Ibarra, head of the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean; and Susanna Malcorra, currently Argentina's foreign minister and former Chef de Cabinet for UN Secretary-General Ban ki-Moon. None of these women have been officially nominated. Countries outside Eastern Europe have been holding back. But the February 29 nomination by Portugal of Antonio Guterres, formerly the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees, may encourage other countries beyond Eastern Europe to step forward with nominations.

Though Russia has already signaled its preference for an Eastern European – code for its intention to veto any others – conceivably no consensus candidate from the region will emerge. Russia has uncomfortable relationships with many Eastern European countries, especially those that have joined NATO or the EU. For instance, Russia is said to have issues with Georgieva because of her role as

an EU official in the imposition of sanctions following Russia's interventions in Ukraine. That Georgieva has issued [conciliatory signals](#) regarding the potential lifting of sanctions may indicate her interest in courting Russia's support, though this may be looked upon with disfavor by France, the UK and the US. Candidates with a good relationship with Russia, such as UNESCO head Bokova, have triggered criticism by American [conservatives](#) because in 2011 UNESCO [welcomed Palestine](#) as a member. Within the UN, Bokova is considered a safe pair of hands – a UN insider who has brought a measure of efficiency to a troubled agency. Among the non-Eastern Europeans, Helen Clark, who has overseen painful cost-cutting and a major restructuring of UNDP, is the leading contender.

If women candidates abound, clarity about whether priority will be given to selecting a woman does not. 49 countries, chaired by Colombia and Costa Rica, have formed the '[Group of Friends in favor of a Woman Candidate for Secretary-General of the United Nations](#)', and have committed to support the selection of a woman for the job. This comes close to calling for an all-female shortlist. Within the US, 35 members of Congress, from both the [House of Representatives](#) and the [Senate](#) have urged the Obama administration to support the selection of a woman SG. Legislators in other countries are taking similar actions.

### **Greater transparency and broader participation**

On February 26 the President of the General Assembly [announced dates](#) (April 11-14) for official candidates to present their wares to the General Assembly. Candidates are asked to provide a 2000-word statement – a kind of 'cover letter' that (presumably) will be publically available – and to engage in dialogue not just with Member-State diplomats, but with civil society groups too. An online portal has been created through which individuals from any country may [submit questions](#) for the candidates. It is not exactly the kind of free and fair election process the UN itself monitors in many countries, and calculations based on national interests will govern the final selection. But it is a big change from past practice.

Reformers have also asked the Security Council to submit not just a single name for endorsement or rejection by the GA, but rather a selection of semi-finalists from which the GA might choose. Reformers have also proposed that the next SG be limited to a single term of seven years instead of a renewable five-year term. The intention is to reduce the incentive for a first-term SG to seek reelection by granting requests for high-level appointments from powerful countries.

### **The need for a feminist woman Secretary-General**

If a woman is chosen as SG, inevitably questions will arise as to whether her gender would bring any added virtues or talents to what Trygve Lie, the UN's first SG, [called](#) "the most impossible job in the world." The case for increasing women's participation, and even seeking gender-parity in national legislatures, is typically made on grounds of both democratic fairness and the need for representation to address pervasive society-wide gender biases in terms of pay differentials, discriminatory laws, and other practices. Special measures, such as electoral quotas for women, are often advocated – including by the UN – to redress persistent gender imbalances in public bodies. Another argument sometimes employed is that women, as members of a socially disadvantaged and often politically excluded group, can help to bring the perspectives of other marginalized constituencies to decision-

making, a claim made by Moldova's official candidate, Natalia Gherman, at an [event](#) in New York in late February. This is addition to the often-repeated claim that women, either “naturally” or because of the social roles that they are forced to play, have an unusual talent for bridging differences and promoting productive compromises – skills that could come in handy for the world's top diplomat.



UN building, New York. Credit: Shutterstock / Drop of Light

There is certainly [evidence](#) that women in decision-making can advance social equality – and specifically gender equality. But, crucially, their ability to do so requires that they be feminists. It is striking that the ‘F’ word has been almost entirely absent in discussions of the qualities and orientations desirable in the next world leader. At a time when issues of gender and sexuality are more politically salient than ever, the selection of a *feminist* Secretary General would seem an urgent priority. There is growing awareness that women's unpaid care responsibilities, weak property rights and constraints on their access to jobs and credit hold back economic development – so much so that increases in women's employment and in men's contribution to unpaid care work are major targets of the UN's recently agreed [Sustainable Development Goals](#).

At the same time, disputes over sexual rights, women's reproductive rights, and adolescent sexuality education have become more [divisive and destructive in international forums](#). Many conservative groups have made a claw-back of women's rights and freedoms an explicit objective of their political projects. Violent extremists have relished the opportunity to horrify the world with the torture and enslavement of women, girls, and homosexuals. Engaging women in the process of “countering violent extremism” is a major talking point in the international community, including in a recent [UN Security Council Resolution](#).

All of this points to the need for not just a woman SG, but a feminist SG. A feminist SG will not find a particularly supportive environment in the UN's Secretariat. Despite the creation in 2011 of UN Women, an agency dedicated to gender equality and women's empowerment, neither objective appears to be a priority for the most powerful parts of the UN secretariat: the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). As with national foreign ministries and defense departments, DPA and DPKO are male-dominated and resistant to the idea that women's empowerment is central to their missions. Their policy statements dutifully recite their

commitment to gender equality, but both DPA and DPKA have sidelined this issue when push comes to shove. They have, for instance, refused to be bound by a 2010 UN system-wide agreement to  [earmark 15%](#) of their funds on activities to promote gender equality and women's empowerment when working in crisis or post-conflict situations. So powerful are DPA and DPKO within the UN system that this blatant disregard for a Secretary-General's spending directive was not called out in two massive 2015 reviews of the UN's  [peacekeeping](#) and  [peacebuilding work](#).



UN officials at Assembly General Debate. Credit: UN

Even on the simple matter of gender balance in staffing, the UN has failed to meet a commitment to increase the number of women in its leadership. In [1986, the General Assembly](#) set a modest goal of having 30% of the UN's top management be women by 2000. Sixteen years past this deadline, the UN has not even reached 25% of women in top management within the Secretariat, according to a [companion article](#) on openDemocracy 50.50 today. [Another analysis](#) shows that, in 2015, 93% of the appointments made by the SG at the level of Under Secretary-General and Assistant Secretary-General were men.

Appointing a woman to the position of Secretary-General of the United Nations would send a strong signal to the world that a person's sex need not constrain their ambition. But it will not necessarily guarantee that women's rights will be at the forefront of the UN's agenda. What is needed is a Secretary-General with the commitment and determination to press the UN to deliver on its many unimplemented gender equality promises, and not to abandon the women's empowerment agenda when it becomes politically uncomfortable – which it often does. In other words, we need a woman *and* a feminist. Is insisting on both as criteria for selecting the next SG asking too much? Is it, as [Anne Marie Slaughter](#) famously put it (in another context) unreasonably demanding to “have it all”? The answer should be a resounding no.

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**2016**

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