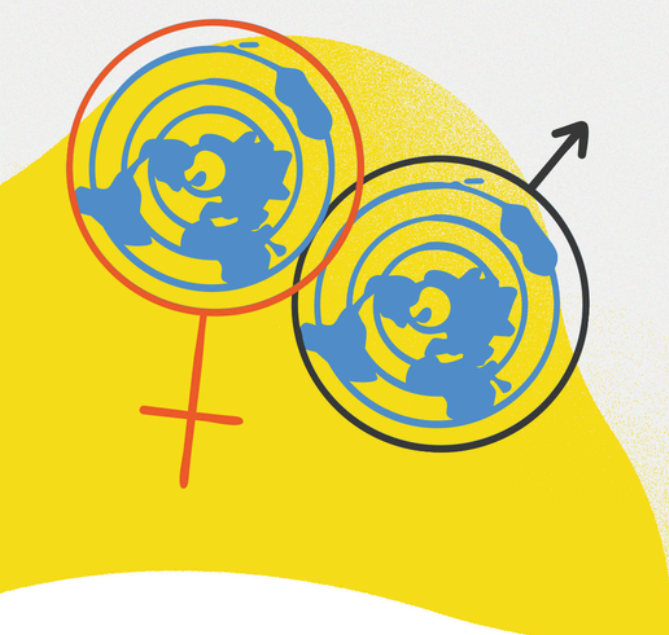




Eighty years without a woman Secretary-General:

Gender, geography, and UN leadership legitimacy



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ABSTRACT

This policy brief examines why the selection process for the next UNSG matters for strengthening the effectiveness of the organization 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 prioritises responses to 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.



Introduction

The selection of the next woman Secretary-General of the United Nations will signal whether multilateral governance is prepared to adapt to contemporary realities or remain anchored in patterns shaped by an earlier geopolitical era.

As the UN marks its eightieth anniversary, it confronts intensifying armed conflict, accelerating climate disruption, and widening sovereign debt distress, pressures borne disproportionately by countries in the Global South. Yet in eight decades, the organisation has never appointed a woman to its highest office.

This absence is no longer a neutral omission; it is a structural gap that undermines alignment between the UN's leadership and the diversity of its membership. Appointing a woman Secretary-General would therefore not only correct a longstanding imbalance, but also strengthen institutional legitimacy, enhance global confidence, and reinforce the UN's capacity to mobilise trust and collective action at a moment of profound global strain.

Leadership selection is not merely procedural—it is constitutive of institutional credibility and global legitimacy. The Secretary-General defines priorities, mediates crises, shapes senior leadership, and embodies the normative voice of the international system. Yet in nearly eight decades of the United Nations, this role has never been held by a woman.

This is not a neutral historical oversight—it is a profound leadership gap. At a time when the global agenda demands more inclusive, collaborative, and responsive forms of leadership, the appointment of a woman Secretary-General is both overdue and strategically necessary. It would signal a decisive commitment to gender equality at the highest level, bring leadership that more fully reflects the world it serves, and strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of the institution in an increasingly complex global landscape.

From Tanzania's perspective, this debate is neither symbolic nor abstract. Since independence under President Julius Nyerere, Tanzania has advanced a foreign policy rooted in sovereign equality, solidarity and reform of global governance. That tradition continues under incumbent President Dr Samia Suluhu Hassan - the first woman to hold the office. Supporting a qualified woman from the Global South aligns with this diplomatic lineage and strengthens coherence between principle and practice.

This brief advances the case that leadership reform is not optional—it is structurally decisive for the credibility and effectiveness of the system. It interrogates why legitimacy is under acute strain in today's crisis context, exposes entrenched imbalances in leadership pathways—including the persistent exclusion of Africa from permanent representation on the United Nations Security Council—assesses the political feasibility of change, and sets out clear, actionable recommendations for reform.

Better aligning UN leadership with the values the Organisation promotes is therefore a condition of political authority and long-term credibility.

Why Leadership Legitimacy Matters Now

The United Nations operates amid interlocking crises. Armed conflict has resurged across multiple regions, and around 80 per cent of UN peacekeeping missions are deployed in African contexts (SIPRI, 2024). Climate-related disasters have tripled over the past three decades, disproportionately affecting African states and small island developing states.

Meanwhile, more than half of low-income countries are in or at high risk of debt distress (IMF, 2023), with several allocating more public revenue to debt servicing than to health or education (UNCTAD, 2023). Youth unemployment remains above 30 per cent in countries such as South Africa, intensifying socio-economic fragility (ILO, 2023).

Regions bearing the greatest operational and developmental burdens, particularly in Africa and the broader Global South, remain underrepresented in global leadership structures.

A consistent pattern emerges across peacekeeping, sovereign debt, climate vulnerability, and youth unemployment: the regions bearing the greatest operational and development pressures, particularly in Africa and the broader Global South, remain underrepresented in global leadership structures.

This imbalance is not only gendered, but also geographic and generational. As the table below illustrates, the concentration of global crises in certain regions is not matched by equivalent representation in the institutions and decision-making spaces shaping international responses.

The geographic concentration of these pressures reveals a widening gap between operational burden and leadership representation (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Crisis Concentration and Leadership Representation

Global Pressure	Current Situation	Geographic Concentration	Leadership Reality
UN peacekeeping deployments	Majority deployed in Africa	Sub-Saharan Africa	Despite Africa hosting around 80% of UN peacekeeping missions, no woman has ever served as Secretary-General and only two Africans have held the position. Senior leadership of peace operations remains predominantly male and externally appointed, reflecting both gender and geographic imbalance.
Sovereign debt distress	Over 50% of low-income countries at high risk	Global South	Decision-making authority in global financial governance remains concentrated outside affected regions. Leadership of key institutions has historically been dominated by advanced economies (e.g., World Bank presidency and IMF leadership traditions), with limited representation from low-income countries.
Climate vulnerability	Disproportionate impact on African states and SIDS	Global South	Leadership of global climate governance institutions does not reflect those most affected by climate risks. Women and Global South actors remain underrepresented in decision-making structures shaping climate finance and adaptation priorities.
Youth unemployment	Exceeds 30% in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa	Sub-Saharan Africa	Global leadership structures remain dominated by older actors from developed regions, while youth from high-unemployment regions, particularly Africa, have limited influence in global decision-making processes.

Source: UNCTAD (2023); UN peacekeeping data; Council on Foreign Relations; UN Women (2023).

The UN Charter affirms sovereign equality and non-discrimination. Article 101(3) says “due regard shall be paid to the importance of recruiting the staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible”.

Yet the UN’s leadership does not reflect demographic parity or the geographic distribution envisioned in the Charter.

For example, almost half of Secretaries-General come from Western Europe and, when it comes to other officials, according to the [NYU-CIC dashboard](#), 44.4% of senior appointments awarded between 2017 and 2022 have come from the Western European and Others Group - a UN regional group. This misalignment weakens credibility.

The “triple disconnect” captures a structural imbalance within the UN system: decision-making authority is concentrated in governance bodies dominated by a few states, financial control rests with major donors, and the countries most affected by UN operations have limited influence over both.

This misalignment is reinforced at the level of senior leadership, where representation remains similarly uneven. The forthcoming appointment of the Secretary-General therefore presents a critical test of whether leadership can more credibly reflect the distribution of global responsibility, risk, and lived experience—including through the long-overdue appointment of a woman.

The United Nations confronts escalating conflict, climate disruption, and sovereign debt distress concentrated in the Global South, yet its leadership has never reflected gender parity nor adequately represented the regions most affected by these crises.

Structural Integrity and Legal Obligation

The office of Secretary-General stands at the intersection of authority and accountability. Although formally appointed by the General Assembly upon recommendation of the Security Council, the decisive stage occurs within the Council, where permanent members retain veto authority.

Institutional credibility requires both fair process and meaningful representation.

A transparent process alone does not guarantee legitimacy if leadership outcomes are shaped by a handful of the world's most powerful states. The makeup of the Security Council itself remains woefully unrepresentative: No member state from Africa, the UN's largest regional bloc with 54 members, holds a permanent seat on the Council.

While the issue of Security Council reform will not be solved before the selection of the next Secretary-General, actions can be taken to improve the fairness and representation within that selection: legitimacy begins with process. General Assembly resolutions and international standards affirm that due regard should be given to achieving gender balance and equitable geographical representation in senior UN leadership, including the position of Secretary-General.

Legal obligations reinforce this. On gender representation, under Article 8 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, States Parties must ensure women's equal opportunity to represent their governments at the international level and participate in international organisations (United Nations, 1979).



The Beijing Platform for Action, under Strategic Objective G.1, commits governments to ensure women’s equal access to decision-making structures at all levels, including international institutions (United Nations, 1995).

These commitments extend directly to nominations and support for senior multilateral appointments.

Regional institutions demonstrate similar principles. The African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights increasingly treat gender balance as integral to institutional legitimacy. Representation strengthens credibility.

Transparent selection procedures, equitable nomination pipelines and gender-balanced shortlists give operational meaning to treaty commitments. Without such measures, formal equality remains incomplete.

Table 2. Legal and Normative Foundations for Gender Parity in International Leadership

Instrument	Relevant Provision	Governance Implication
CEDAW (1979)	Article 8	States must ensure women’s equal opportunity to represent their governments at the international level
Beijing Platform for Action (1995)	Strategic Objective G.1	Governments must ensure equal access to decision-making structures, including international institutions
UNGA Resolution 75/325 (2021)	Strengthened oversight of senior appointments	Reinforces transparency and accountability in Secretary-General selection
African regional human rights bodies	Gender balance increasingly embedded in institutional practice	Representation treated as integral to institutional legitimacy

Source: *United Nations (1979; 1995; 2021); African regional instruments.*

Experience, Diversity and Institutional Performance

Leadership reform rests on two complementary foundations: procedural legitimacy and diversity of experience.

For procedural legitimacy, steps taken in the SG selection process must be consistent with Charter principles and treaty obligations. Further, diversity of experience will be vital to enhance the deliberative quality and policy relevance of discussions between decision-making states and with candidates.

Discussions should be informed by empirical evidence which shows the link between representation and performance. Peace agreements are up to 35 per cent more likely to endure when women participate meaningfully in negotiations (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). Gender-balanced governance correlates with stronger health systems and more inclusive policy outcomes (UN Women, 2023).

Gender and geographic representation are not about optics, they are about legal obligation and effective leadership. Institutions that fail to reflect both risk diminished legitimacy and impact.

Leadership grounded in Global South realities further enhances credibility. More than half of low-income countries face or risk debt distress (UNCTAD, 2023). Climate adaptation financing gaps remain concentrated in vulnerable regions. Leaders shaped by these pressures bring experiential insight to negotiations on debt restructuring, climate finance and development reform.

A procedurally fair selection process that continues to exclude women risks entrenching symbolic compliance rather than substantive equality. Elevating a woman to the role of Secretary-General is therefore not a departure from merit, but a necessary correction that aligns fairness with lived experience. Institutional integrity demands both.

Coalition Coordination and Tanzania's Strategic Positioning

The appointment of the Secretary-General remains shaped by political negotiation as much as formal procedure. Although the General Assembly makes the final appointment, the Security Council recommendation stage remains decisive. Any viable candidate must secure broad acceptability among permanent members while maintaining legitimacy across the wider membership.

Regional rotation, though not codified in the Charter, continues to function as a decisive political norm.

The current cycle is widely perceived as favouring Latin American representation—creating a strategic opening to align geographic balance with gender equality through the appointment of a woman Secretary-General. While partial endorsements within regional groupings can provide an important foundation, cohesive and coordinated backing significantly enhances collective leverage and strengthens the legitimacy of a candidate's pathway to selection.

The feasibility of a candidacy depends on early and strategic coalition-building.

This dynamic is particularly salient for advancing historically underrepresented leadership, including the appointment of a woman Secretary-General, where broad-based support signals both political viability and normative alignment.

Given the size and political weight of their membership, coordination within the African Union and the Group of 77 will be especially consequential. Cross-regional alignment, particularly between African and Latin American states, could strengthen the credibility and viability of a candidacy.

Equally important is how the case is framed. Presenting gender parity as strengthening institutional coherence—rather than as a contest between blocs—can reduce political resistance. Anchoring the argument in established legal commitments, including CEDAW Article 8, alongside evidence of women’s effectiveness in peace processes and crisis response, situates reform within a governance and performance logic rather than identity-based claims.

Security Council dynamics require pragmatic engagement. A candidate perceived as competent, reform-oriented, and diplomatically balanced is more likely to secure broad acceptability.

For women candidates in particular—who have historically been subjected to heightened scrutiny and, at times, perceptions of symbolic inclusion—there is a delicate balance between visibility and legitimacy.

In this context, early informal consultations, more transparent and inclusive vetting processes—such as open dialogues advocated by civil society—and sustained coalition messaging can help demonstrate competence, build trust, and strengthen both visibility and overall viability.

Tanzania’s positioning reflects a sustained diplomatic trajectory grounded in principles of sovereign equality, African representation, and systemic reform.

This legacy—shaped by Julius Nyerere and carried forward under Samia Suluhu Hassan—supports emerging calls for leadership reform that addresses both geographic and gender imbalances at the highest level, including the appointment of a woman Secretary-General.

In 2012, Minister for Foreign Affairs Augustine Mahiga reaffirmed Tanzania’s commitment to United Nations reform and equitable representation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tanzania, 2012). More recently, Tanzania reiterated calls for justice and stronger African voice at the General Assembly (The Citizen, 2025).

President Samia Suluhu Hassan’s engagement with UN leadership further reinforced Tanzania’s reform agenda and sustainable development partnership (Business Insider Tanzania, 2026). These positions demonstrate policy consistency across administrations.

As a State Party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (United Nations, 1979), Tanzania carries binding obligations under Article 8 to ensure women's equal opportunity to represent their governments at the international level. Its endorsement of the Beijing Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995) further commits it to equal access to decision-making structures.

Advocating transparent and inclusive leadership selection therefore aligns with commitments Tanzania has already undertaken. It reflects institutional coherence between treaty obligation, diplomatic tradition and contemporary reform advocacy.

Tanzania's engagement can operate on two complementary foundations. Procedurally, it can support merit-based nomination systems consistent with Article 8 obligations and Resolution 75/325. Experientially, it can emphasise leadership shaped by peacekeeping engagement, climate vulnerability and development finance pressures — realities that define much of the UN's operational agenda.

Leadership reform thus becomes an extension of Tanzania's longstanding diplomatic orientation. It reinforces credibility within regional coalitions while contributing constructively to broader multilateral reform.

Political feasibility ultimately rests on timing, coordination and principled framing. Where Member States align early around institutional coherence, leadership outcomes become more predictable. Where fragmentation persists, informal power dynamics dominate.

For Tanzania, strategic coordination within regional and cross-regional platforms offers a pathway to advance reform while preserving diplomatic balance.

Tanzania's Strategic Positioning

Within contemporary debates on reform of the United Nations, questions of institutional legitimacy, transparency in leadership selection, and equitable representation have gained renewed prominence.

These concerns are closely linked to longstanding critiques of the concentration of leadership within a narrow geographic and gender profile. As discussions on reform intensify, attention has increasingly turned to how leadership selection processes can better reflect the diversity of the international community, including through greater representation of women and leaders from the Global South.

The election of Salim Ahmed Salim as President of the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 placed a Tanzanian diplomat at the centre of debates on equitable participation of developing countries in international decision-making (United Nations 1979; Salim 2014).

Likewise, the appointment of Gertrude Mongella as Secretary-General of the Fourth World Conference on Women positioned Tanzania at a pivotal moment in the consolidation of global gender equality norms, culminating in the Beijing Platform for Action (United Nations 1995).

These precedents illustrate how Tanzania's multilateral engagement has historically supported principles that underpin credible global governance—transparency in institutional processes, legitimacy through broader representation, and recognition of gender equality as an international normative commitment.

Within this framework, current calls for a more transparent and merit-based selection process for UN leadership, alongside growing support for the appointment of a woman from the Global South as Secretary-General, reflect both evolving global expectations and Tanzania's longstanding diplomatic orientation toward inclusive and legitimate multilateralism.

Tanzania can advance reform by aligning institutional credibility with the urgent imperative of women's leadership. In this context, leadership reform is not incidental:

It is a continuation of Tanzania's diplomatic tradition, reinforcing consistency between treaty commitments, multilateral advocacy, and strategic engagement.

Concluding remarks:

Law, Representation and Institutional Credibility

The forthcoming appointment of the Secretary-General will test whether the United Nations aligns leadership practice with the principles it affirms.

Article 8 of CEDAW obliges states to ensure women's equal participation in international representation. The Beijing Platform for Action commits governments to equal access to decision-making structures. These frameworks establish a clear normative baseline.

Conflict, climate volatility and sovereign debt distress increasingly define the lived realities of the Global South. Leadership disconnected from these pressures weakens institutional credibility. Leadership grounded in these realities strengthens deliberation and trust.

Procedural fairness and experiential diversity are not competing claims. One secures equitable access. The other strengthens institutional performance. Both are necessary for integrity.

After eighty years without appointing a woman Secretary-General, the United Nations faces a crossroads. The decision ahead will signal whether UN principles operate in practice, or remain theoretical.

Institutional credibility rests on coherence between law, representation and performance. The next appointment offers an opportunity to reinforce that coherence — and to demonstrate that multilateral leadership evolves with the realities it is meant to serve.



Recommendations

Considering the challenges identified in this brief, the following recommendations outline a set of practical and political measures aimed at strengthening the legitimacy, inclusiveness, and effectiveness of the Secretary-General selection process. The proposals focus on how leadership selection can better reflect the realities, priorities, and governance expectations emerging from Global South contexts.

For Member States:

01

Institutionalise transparent and competitive nomination processes, including public calls for candidates, clearly articulated evaluation criteria, and structured, open dialogues with nominees.

02

Operationalise commitments under CEDAW Article 8 by actively advancing women candidates, ensuring gender-balanced shortlists, and equitable access to leadership pipelines.

03

Strengthen coordinated regional engagement, particularly within the African Union and the Group of 77, to present unified, merit-based support for qualified candidates—including women—thereby enhancing both bargaining power and the legitimacy of the selection process.



Recommendations

For the General Assembly:

01

Strengthen oversight authority under UN General Assembly Resolution 75/325 through clear timelines, reporting requirements, and transparent candidate engagement processes that elevate the visibility and fair assessment of women candidates.

For Tanzania:

01

Publicly frame leadership reform as a gender equality imperative, positioning the appointment of a woman Secretary-General as a necessary expression of treaty commitments and longstanding multilateral reform advocacy, and reinforcing coherence between domestic obligations and international positioning.

02

Champion transparent and inclusive leadership selection processes within the United Nations, ensuring that such processes actively enable the identification, visibility, and advancement of qualified women candidates through public calls, clear evaluation criteria, and open engagement.

Recommendations

03

Actively support and advance the nomination of qualified women candidates, consistent with commitments under CEDAW Article 8, and advocate for gender-balanced shortlists.

04

Publicly call on candidates to articulate and commit to inclusive, gender- and geographically responsive leadership approaches, including in the appointment of senior officials—particularly in political and peacekeeping portfolios—thereby embedding gender parity and representation within the broader architecture of UN leadership.

05

Leverage its diplomatic positioning within the African Union and the Group of 77 to build coordinated, merit-based support for candidates who advance both gender equality and equitable geographic representation, strengthening both legitimacy and reform outcomes.



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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.

ESRF is a member of **Southern Voice**, a network of Global South think tanks working to amplify evidence-based perspectives in global development debates, and participates in the **1 for 8 Billion** campaign as a Campaign Partner, contributing research to inform the selection of the next UN Secretary-General.



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