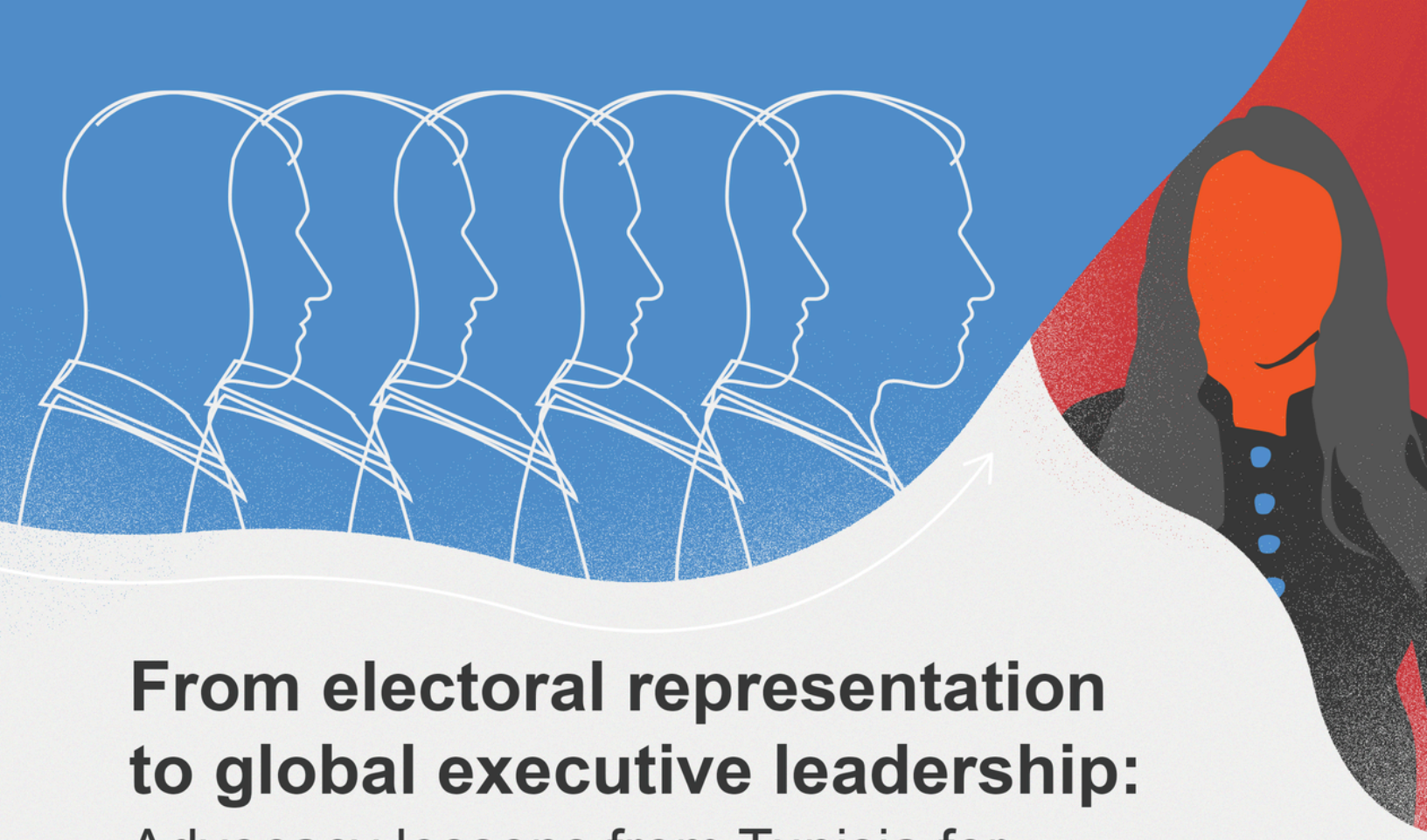
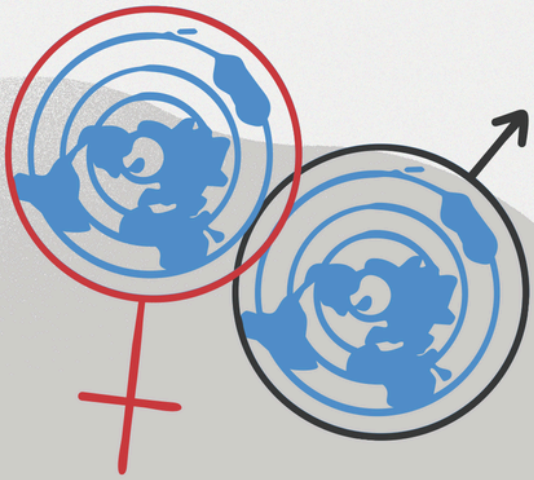


From electoral representation to global executive leadership:

Advocacy lessons from Tunisia for supporting the election of a woman Secretary-General



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ABSTRACT

Using Tunisia's post-2011 political trajectory as a comparative lens, this brief examines how institutional design, political gatekeeping, socio-cultural norms, and resource constraints shape women's access to leadership. It argues that the absence of a woman Secretary-General is not incidental, but reflects structural barriers embedded in the rules, practices, and informal dynamics of the selection process. Drawing on electoral evidence and stakeholder analysis, the brief presents women's leadership as a matter of institutional reform and outlines strategies to strengthen political viability through coordinated advocacy.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) has long positioned itself as a global standard-setter on women's rights, political participation, and gender equality. Yet despite decades of norm-building on women's leadership across peace and security, development, human rights, and governance, the office of Secretary-General has never been held by a woman. This persistent absence exposes a deeper tension between the principles the UN promotes and the political structures through which access to its highest executive office is determined.

> **Where outcomes are shaped by the interaction of formal rules and informal power, neutrality can reproduce inequality.**

The Tunisian case offers a timely and valuable lens through which to address this tension. By examining the determinants of women's election since 2011, it identifies the conditions under which women's access to formal political authority can expand, stagnate, or regress.

Tunisia is particularly useful because its post-2011 trajectory includes both a period of rapid institutional advancement in women's representation and a later period of decline following changes to the electoral system. This gives the case strong analytical value: it allows observers to see with unusual clarity the effects of both enabling and disabling environments.

The policy implication is direct: where outcomes are shaped by the interaction of formal rules and informal power, neutrality can reproduce inequality. This insight applies directly to the UN context.

The selection of the Secretary-General is not governed by parity rules, but nor is it a purely open or neutral process. It is structured by precedent, power asymmetry, diplomatic negotiation, elite endorsement, and informal norms regarding credibility, acceptability, and leadership profile.

This brief argues that the case for a woman Secretary-General should not be framed as a symbolic appeal for gender balance alone. Instead, it should be presented as a structural and institutional reform claim aimed at correcting a longstanding imbalance in global governance.

The argument rests on a dual claim: first, that women's leadership is a matter of justice and equal access; and second, that electing a woman Secretary-General would strengthen the legitimacy, representativeness, and effectiveness of the UN system itself.

The brief develops this argument in four stages. It first explains why the Tunisian experience offers a valuable comparative lens for global advocacy.

It then analyses the conditions shaping women's access to leadership across four dimensions: institutional, political, socio-cultural, and economic determinants.

Building on this analysis, it draws conclusions for the UN context and sets out actor-based policy recommendations to strengthen the political, institutional, and procedural conditions required to advance the election of a woman as Secretary-General.

The continuing absence of a woman Secretary-General should therefore not be read as an accidental gap, but as evidence of the need for intentional political advocacy and structural correction.

The Tunisian Experience

Its Relevance to the UN Secretary-General Selection Process

Since 2011, Tunisia's political trajectory has undergone a profound transition accompanied by a comprehensive reconfiguration of the constitutional and electoral framework. This redefined the rules of political competition and redistributed opportunities within the field of representation.

Progress is not merely a function of evolving attitudes; it is strongly shaped by the rules and arrangements through which competition is organized.

The incorporation of the mandatory parity principle within closed electoral lists, reinforced by alternation requirements and later constitutional commitments to parity, constituted one of the most salient manifestations of this shift, insofar as it represented a direct institutional intervention to re-engineer opportunities for access to parliament.

Owing to these mechanisms, the proportion of women's representation in the 2011 and 2014 elections rose to levels approaching one third, based on national electoral data analysed in this study, leading the Tunisian experience to be invoked in comparative scholarship as a telling case at the intersection of gender and democratic transition.

Its post-2011 trajectory offers an almost quasi-experimental institutional comparison between two phases: one that emerged after the 2011 transition, when closed-list electoral competition, constitutional commitments to parity, and alternation requirements rapidly expanded women's parliamentary presence.

This was followed by a second phase after the 2022 electoral shift, which replaced list-based competition with individual candidacies, removed those corrective mechanisms, and led to a sharp decline.

This brief does not seek to equate parliamentary elections in Tunisia with the diplomatic process through which the UN Secretary-General is selected. The two settings are obviously different in scale, institutional architecture, and legal procedure.

However, they are comparable in a deeper and more important sense: in both contexts, women's access to leadership is mediated by rules, gatekeepers, resources, and perceptions.

In both contexts, formal equality does not automatically produce equal opportunity. And in both contexts, progress depends on whether political structures are designed and used in ways that facilitate women's entry into serious contention for power.

The value of the Tunisian case lies not only in its empirical findings but also in the clarity with which it reveals the mechanics of women's access to power.

Comparative scholarship has shown that women's representation is the outcome of a multi-level causal interaction, in which institutional, party, social, and political factors operate within a complex explanatory structure (Norris, 2004, p. 25).

The Tunisian trajectory offers a particularly clear illustration of how these determinants can widen, constrain, or abruptly reverse women's pathways to leadership.

First, it demonstrates that institutional design matters. The structure of opportunity can widen or narrow women's chances dramatically.

In Tunisia, women's parliamentary representation rose under a supportive electoral system and declined when that system was dismantled, increasing from 26.27% in 2011 to a peak of 31% in 2014, before declining to 24.4% in 2019 and collapsing to 15.6% after the post-2022 institutional rupture.

This shows concrete evidence that progress is not merely a function of evolving attitudes; it is strongly shaped by the rules and arrangements through which competition is organized.

Second, the Tunisian case shows that regression should not be interpreted as proof of women's unsuitability for leadership.

Rather, the post-2022 institutional rupture removed inclusion mechanisms and shifted competition into a high-cost, individualized electoral market whose effects were not gender-neutral, as evidenced by the analysis presented in this study.

The transition to individual-candidate voting moved the burden of resources from collective list financing to direct personal financing, while the weakening of party mediation made media visibility, local alliances, constituency-level trust, pre-existing social and political capital, and gendered stereotypes of leadership far more decisive to electoral success.

In this setting, women's exclusion increasingly reflected unequal access to financial resources, networks, and local influence rather than any decline in competence. This dynamic reflects a wider structural pattern.

In Latin America, only 10 countries earmark public party financing by gender (UN Women, 2025), showing how limited access to collective financing structures continues to constrain women's political competitiveness and shift the burden toward personal resources and informal sponsorship.

Third, the case emphasizes the role of intermediaries and gatekeepers. During Tunisia's list-based phase, parties functioned as the principal gateways through which legal parity was translated into seats.

Their internal governance, control over list leadership, and authority over candidate ranking determined whether women entered the winnable range or remained confined to low-prospect constituencies.

In practice, parity could be reduced to symbolic compliance when parties treated women's inclusion as an administrative obligation, and reserved high-value constituencies for men.

The parallel in the UN context is clear: the decisive intermediaries are Member States, regional groups, diplomatic networks, and actors that confer legitimacy and mobilize support.

This gatekeeping role is built into the nomination process itself. Since the 2015 opening of the process, no candidacy can enter the formal race without the backing of at least one UN Member State.

This was a major transparency breakthrough because, for the first time, any Member State could put forward a candidate, rather than leaving the field entirely to opaque Security Council bargaining. Yet the reform also made visible the gatekeeping power of states: nomination remains the first institutional filter through which viable candidacies must pass.

As 1 for 8 Billion has documented, the initial lack of clarity in the 2015–16 cycle generated the misperception that candidates had to be nominated by their own governments and by a single state, which narrowed the pool and made candidacies vulnerable to domestic political calculations. Subsequent reforms clarified that nominations may come from at least one state, including states of which the candidate is not a citizen, and may be submitted jointly by several states, precisely to reduce patronage and widen access to the race (1 for 8 Billion, Nominations Explainer).

In sum, the Tunisian case matters because it turns a broad normative claim into an evidence-based political argument. It shows that women's access to leadership is conditional, that exclusion has structural causes, and that institutional design plays a decisive role in shaping those outcomes. At the same time, it highlights that while corrective mechanisms can expand access, their effects are not self-sustaining and depend on broader social and political conditions.

Analytical Framework

Four Determinants of Women's Access to Leadership

Institutional Determinants

The electoral system establishes the "ceiling of possibilities" for women's representation. Rather than serving merely as a technical mechanism for converting votes into seats, it functions as an opportunity structure that redistributes political chances among actors and directly shapes women's access to representative institutions.

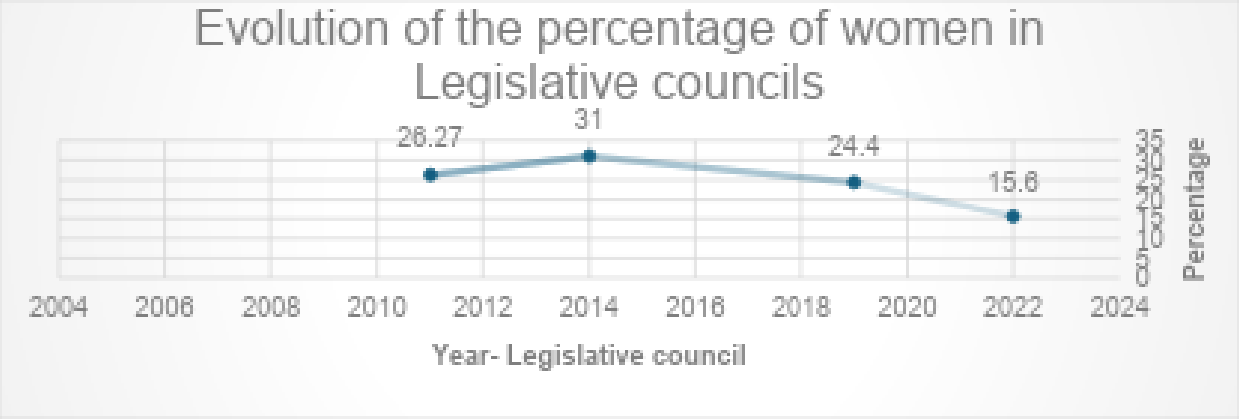
In Tunisia, this ceiling expanded when electoral competition was organised through closed lists governed by parity and alternation requirements, and contracted when the system shifted to individual-candidate competition without corrective mechanisms.

The policy significance of this finding lies in its structural implication: women's opportunities are not simply discovered within institutions, but actively produced by institutional design.

In Tunisia, the introduction of a list-based proportional electoral framework combined with parity and alternation requirements significantly expanded women's representation. The subsequent shift to an individual-candidate system without such mechanisms contributed to a substantial decline. This approach shows that legal change may be a necessary condition but remains insufficient if it is not accompanied by shifts in the political, social, and perceptual structures through which women's candidacies are evaluated and converted into viable leadership pathways.

This effect becomes especially apparent when comparing the period during which a system supportive of women's presence was in place (2011–2019), during which women's representation remained above one quarter of legislative seats and peaked at 31% in 2014, with the period in which those mechanisms of inclusion were dismantled (from 2022 onward), leading to a collapse in representation to 15.6%.

Figure 1: Evolution of the percentage of women in Tunisia's legislative councils (2011–2022).



Source: Authors' elaboration based on legislative council composition data, Tunisia (2011–2022).

For the UN context, the institutional analogue is not an electoral formula but the process architecture that shapes which candidacies become politically viable. This architecture operates through how candidates enter the process, how visibility and legitimacy are distributed during the public stages, and how opacity persists in the final filtering stages controlled by the Security Council.

As in Tunisia, these procedural choices shape the effective ceiling of possibilities by determining whether formal openness translates into real competitiveness for women candidates.

The 2016 reforms offer the clearest precedent for this institutional logic. By introducing a more formal nomination process, public vision statements, and General Assembly dialogues, they widened the field of plausible candidacies and contributed to an unprecedented pool of 13 candidates, including 7 women.

Yet the persistence of opaque straw polls and the Security Council single-name recommendation pattern shows that institutional design can still favour continuity over change by narrowing the viable field at the decisive stage (Security Council Report, 2016).

The comparative institutional lesson is therefore not simply that procedures matter, but that:

> **Formally open procedures are insufficient when the decisive stages of selection remain structured by opacity, concentrated veto power, and single-path recommendation practices.**

The process should therefore be approached as an equity-oriented design challenge, rather than on the assumption that existing rules are neutral in their effects.

Political Determinants

The political determinant concerns the role of organised actors who mediate access to power. In Tunisia, political parties were central not only because they fielded candidates, but because they controlled the terms on which women appeared competitively. This remained true even under parity rules.

While electoral lists were required to alternate men and women, party leadership retained control over the most winnable positions, especially list leadership.

NDI data from the 2014 elections show substantial variation across parties, from 38% women heading candidate lists in Union for Tunisia to only 9% in both Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes.

This gap reveals how parties could formally comply with parity while preserving male dominance over the positions most likely to translate into seats, effectively turning parity into a symbolic measure rather than a guarantee of equal access.

This pattern remained visible beyond 2014. Statistics from the 2019 elections to the Assembly of the Representatives of the People show that only 16% of candidate lists were headed by women, reinforcing the persistence of male dominance over list leadership even under a formally parity-compliant framework (Aswat Nissa, statistical study, archival source).

Table 1. Women as Heads of Political Party Candidate Lists (Tunisia, 2014)

The Party or the Coalition	Percentage
Union for Tunisia (Al- Ittihad min ajl Tounes)	38%
Congress for the Republic (Al moutamar min ajl al-joumhouriya)	21%
Democratic Current (Attayar Al-dimoukrati)	21%
Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (Ettakatol)	17%
The Republican Party (Al-Joumhouri)	17%
Popular Front (Al-Jibha Al-chaabiya)	15%
Free Patriotic Union (Al-Ittihad Al-watani Al-hour)	15%
The Initiative (Al- Moubadara)	14%
Tunisia Horizons (Afek Tounes)	12%
Renaissance Movement (Ennahda)	9%
Call for Tunisia (Nidaa Tounes)	9%
Democratic Alliance (Attahalouf Al-dimoukrati)	7%

Source: National Democratic Institute, Final Report on the 2014 Legislative and Presidential Elections in Tunisia, Washington, DC, NDI, 2015, p. 29.

The United Nations equivalent lies in the behaviour of Member States and diplomatic coalitions. Just as Tunisian parties could convert formal parity into either substantive access or symbolic compliance by controlling list leadership and winnable positions, Member States act as the primary political gatekeepers of access to the Secretary-General race.

While the formal process involves nomination, consultation, and recommendation, the viability of any candidacy depends on political sponsorship by at least one Member State, coalition backing across regional and diplomatic groupings, and ultimately surviving the decisive stages of the process without being blocked by any of the five veto-holding permanent members of the Security Council.

This insight is highly relevant to international institutions.

Across 62 multilateral organisations, women currently lead 46% of institutions, yet they hold only 29% of governing body seats and just 23% of UN Permanent Representative posts in New York (GWL Voices, 2026).

This shows that presence in senior roles does not automatically translate into access to the coalition-building and elite sponsorship spaces from which top appointments are ultimately decided.

The historical nomination record reinforces the same gatekeeping dynamic: across more than 80 years of Secretary-General selection, only eight women have entered the field of formal candidacies.

Even more revealing, only 7% of the more than 2,800 Permanent Representatives who have served since 1947 were women (GWL Voices, 2025). The fact that women were entirely absent from the first six decades of candidacies underscores that the bottleneck has not been the availability of qualified women, but the willingness of Member States to nominate them in the first place.

This makes Member States not only formal sponsors, but decisive upstream gatekeepers in defining who enters the politically viable pool.

Socio-Cultural Determinants

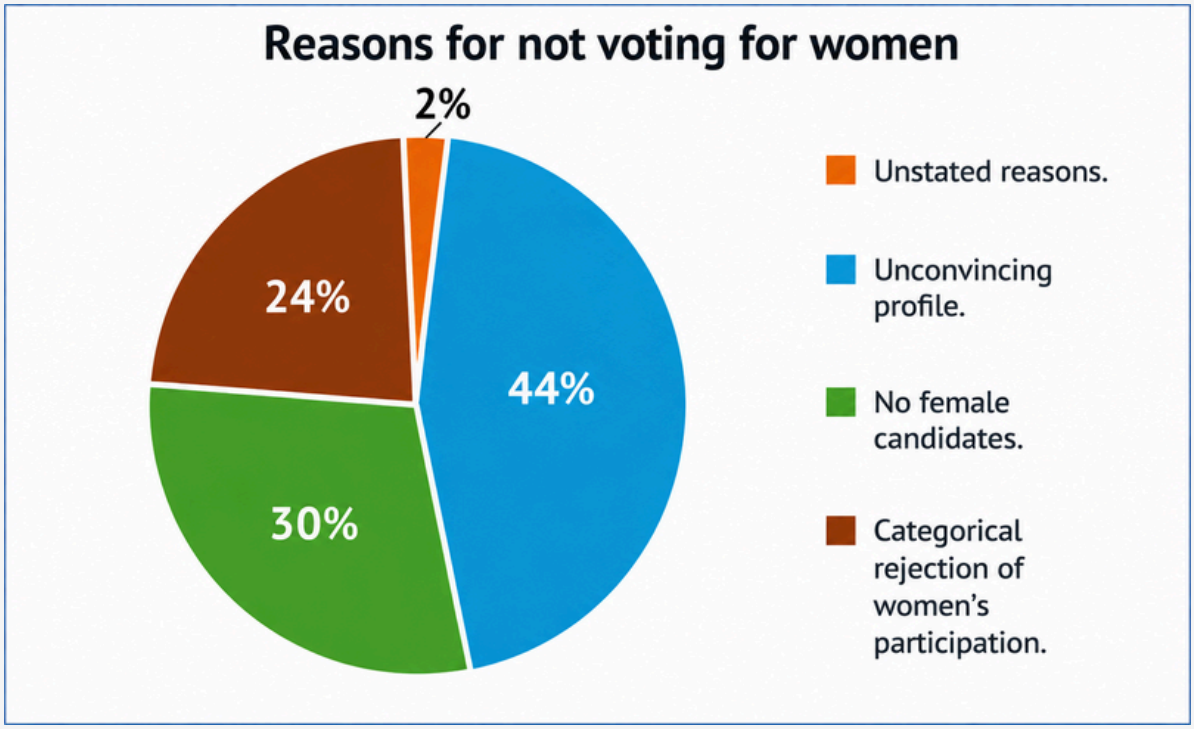
Socio-cultural determinants usually shape women's access to leadership not through direct rejection, but through indirect and cumulative mechanisms that filter perceptions of competence, authority, and symbolic legitimacy.

In Tunisia, this effect became more visible after the shift to individual-candidate voting, which reduced the mitigating role of party mediation and made electoral choice revolve more directly around the candidate's image, local trust, prior political experience, financial resources, and accumulated social and political capital convertible into votes.

Under this design, women's representation becomes less a collective right supported by public policy and more an individual exception negotiated within a socially unequal environment.

Survey evidence from the Tunisian case helps distinguish between two different layers of socio-cultural constraint. At the level of voter perception, 30% of respondents identified women's reluctance to run as one of the reasons behind negative voting against female candidates, alongside weak confidence in the candidate's profile (44%).

Figure 2: Reasons for voting against women.



Source: Authors' elaboration based on original Solidar survey data on attitudes toward women's candidacies in Tunisia.

Economic and Resource Determinants

Economic and resource determinants shape women's competitiveness by redistributing the material conditions of candidacy.

In Tunisia, the shift from list-based to individual-candidate competition relocated the burden of resources from a collective list-financing logic to a person-financing logic, making direct access to personal funds, media visibility, field mobilisation, and local alliance networks a central condition of electoral viability.

This redesign amplified pre-existing disparities because actors with narrower resource networks were now required to build an independent campaign infrastructure at significantly higher cost.

This effect is reinforced by evidence from women candidates themselves. UN Women data from the 2022 Tunisian elections show that 68% of women candidates believed their candidacy would have been viable with greater financial resources, while 90% reported lacking the resources necessary to mount an electoral campaign (UN Women, 2023, p. 47).

Translated into the UN setting, the relevant resource gap concerns not campaign finance in the electoral sense, but access to the integrity and support infrastructure required to sustain a viable candidacy.

Since the 2016 reforms, candidates are expected to maintain vision-setting, diplomatic outreach, and sustained engagement with Member States, while the 1 for 8 Billion campaign now explicitly emphasizes "campaigning with integrity" and the need to ensure candidates can focus on setting out a strong vision rather than making backroom deals (1 for 8 Billion, 2025).

This reveals that the economic determinant in the UN context lies in unequal access not only to strategic communications and diplomatic backing, but also to the informal brokerage circuits that can convert support into viability.

Advocacy must therefore help build transparent support ecosystems that reduce dependence on opaque patronage and make women's candidacies politically competitive on fairer terms.

More importantly, the survey also captured women's own reported willingness to compete:

> **89% of female respondents stated that they would themselves refuse to run for office, compared with only 11% who expressed readiness to do so.**

The main reasons for this refusal were as follows: lack of interest in political life (50%); not having an appropriate personal profile for political life (21%); prioritizing social or professional life (20%); and other reasons (9%). This abstention therefore reflects a social phenomenon that goes beyond mere individual choice and is linked to the concept of social and political capital, which is decisive under an individual-candidate electoral system.

This second finding shows that socio-cultural barriers do not operate only through voter judgment, but also through women's own anticipation of the costs, expectations, and risks associated with entering political competition.

This is highly relevant to international advocacy. Resistance to a woman Secretary-General may not always be articulated as outright opposition to women leaders.

More often, it takes the form of judgments about readiness, geopolitical "fit", gravitas, or the presumed need for a style of authority still implicitly coded as masculine. Helen Clark's reflection on her 2016 candidacy captures this dynamic clearly: ***"I don't expect anyone, ever, to vote for me because I'm a woman. But I don't expect them not to vote because I'm a woman"*** (The Guardian, 2017).

As GWL Voices suggests, the core issue is less a tension between gender and merit than whether standards of merit have been defined and applied fairly.

Advocacy must therefore work not only at the level of rights, but also at the level of demonstrated institutional effectiveness, making women's executive leadership appear not exceptional, experimental, or symbolic, but empirically grounded, institutionally credible, authoritative, and strategically necessary for effective multilateral leadership.

Concluding remarks:

The Tunisian experience offers a clear and powerful lesson for global advocacy: women's access to leadership is neither automatic nor neutral. It depends on the interaction of rules, institutions, intermediaries, social perceptions, and resources. Women advance when these factors align in supportive ways, and they regress when those supports are withdrawn or weakened. This also means that timing and coalition matter.

Progress can be rapid under favourable conditions and equally rapid in reverse once those conditions deteriorate. In the current international climate, where political consensus around gender equality can no longer be assumed and previously consolidated gains face renewed contestation, this lesson becomes even more urgent. Advocacy must therefore be strategic, not episodic. It should build momentum early, cultivate a durable coalition, and seek to establish a political norm that makes the exclusion of serious women candidates increasingly difficult to justify.

The absence of a woman from the United Nations' highest office should therefore be treated as the predictable outcome of a governance environment in which formal commitments to equality coexist with informal barriers to viability.

No single pathway is sufficient to alter the conditions that shape political viability at the highest level of multilateral leadership. Public visibility can shift expectations, rights-based framing can reinforce normative legitimacy, and institutional reform can widen procedural access, but none of these interventions is likely to succeed in isolation.

The most effective approach is therefore a coordinated ecosystem strategy that aligns Member States, regional blocs, diplomatic coalitions, credible women candidates, civil society networks, and campaign actors around a common objective: transforming formal openness into substantive political viability. The recommendations that follow translate this structural logic into actionable steps for the actors most capable of reshaping the selection environment.

Recommendations

Building on the barriers identified throughout the brief, the following recommendations focus on how institutional design, political gatekeeping, and advocacy strategies can shape women's access to leadership.

01

Member States should commit early to gender-inclusive and cross-regional nomination practices

Member States should commit to identifying and advancing qualified women candidates early in the nomination cycle. Formal openness does not by itself produce substantive access. Entry depends on whether gatekeepers convert procedural eligibility into politically viable pathways. In the UN context, this requires moving beyond rhetorical support and ensuring that women candidates are actively sponsored, publicly endorsed, and treated as serious contenders from the outset.
Where politically useful, Member States should also make greater use of joint and cross-national nominations, building on the clarification that candidates may be nominated by one or more states, including states other than their own nationality. This can reduce domestic political bottlenecks and widen access to viable candidacies.

02

Move from formal neutrality to equity-oriented process design

Process reform should move beyond the assumption that formally neutral rules automatically generate fair outcomes. The Tunisian case demonstrates that legal and institutional reforms are necessary but insufficient when broader political, socio-cultural, and resource structures continue to reproduce unequal access. In the UN context, this means redesigning the Secretary-General selection process around equity-oriented principles that recognise how opacity, veto concentration, informal sponsorship circuits, and unexamined leadership norms continue to advantage traditional candidate profiles.

Recommendations

03

Civil society coalitions should build a durable narrative and support ecosystem

Civil society coalitions, think tanks, women's leadership networks, and campaign actors should help construct a durable ecosystem that combines policy expertise, strategic communications, diplomatic outreach, media engagement, and credible institutional endorsements.

This ecosystem should consistently frame women's leadership as an institutional and governance asset, emphasising crisis leadership, coalition-building, institutional reform capability, multilateral legitimacy, and representational credibility.

04

Advocacy coalitions should reduce dependence on opaque brokerage

The economic determinant in both Tunisia and the UN context shows that formal qualification is insufficient without viable support infrastructure. Advocacy coalitions should therefore build transparent ecosystems of support that reduce dependence on opaque patronage circuits and informal brokerage.

Recommendations

05

The coordinating advocacy coalition should adopt stakeholder mapping and progress indicators as core political tools

Stakeholder mapping should be treated as a core political instrument rather than a communications exercise. Member States, regional blocs, former officials, diplomatic brokers, and public champions should be classified according to likely support, strategic importance, and possible resistance.

At the same time, the coalition should monitor concrete indicators of progress, including:

- Public endorsements secured
- Number of states openly supporting the principle of a woman Secretary-General
- Diversity and regional reach of the coalition
- Visibility of women candidates as serious contenders
- Uptake of campaign framing in official diplomatic discourse
- Use of joint nominations and cross-regional sponsorship

06

Build early momentum through competence-based visibility

Advocacy efforts should invest early in building sustained momentum around credible women candidates through competence-based visibility rather than symbolic urgency alone. Because gains can accelerate rapidly under favourable conditions and reverse just as quickly, momentum-building should be continuous rather than episodic, beginning well before the formal nomination cycle.

Recommendations

07

Link the demand to broader debates on legitimacy and representativeness in global governance

The election of a woman Secretary-General should be framed not as an isolated exception, but as part of a broader effort to strengthen legitimacy, representativeness, and institutional effectiveness across multilateral governance.
Think tanks, diplomatic forums, women's leadership platforms, and reform networks should connect this demand to wider debates on leadership diversity, equitable representation, institutional credibility, and the kinds of executive leadership required to strengthen trust and effectiveness in global institutions.

08

Maintain direct leverage with gatekeepers at decisive stages

Public visibility and coalition breadth should be explicitly linked to diplomatic strategies that influence nomination decisions, coalition formation, and perceptions of viability at the decisive stages of the process.
This requires sustained engagement with Member States, regional groups, diplomatic brokers, former senior UN officials, and influential multilateral voices capable of conferring seriousness on women's candidacies.

Solidar Tunisie

Solidar Tunisie is a non-governmental think tank based in Tunisia that promotes social and economic inclusion through programmes supporting employment, entrepreneurship, and local development. Its activities involve public institutions, civil society actors, and local stakeholders in addressing structural barriers to opportunity. In this report, the organization draws on its national experience to highlight how structural barriers shape women's access to leadership positions, thereby contributing to broader discussions on access to power within global governance frameworks.

Solidar Tunisie 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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