



Empowering Change from Within: Women in Political Leadership

As International Women's Day approaches, we reflect on the progress, or lack thereof, of women assuming leadership roles, particularly in governments and international organizations. The benefits of having women as leaders are many, yet the knowledge-action gap remains wide.

International Women's Day, observed globally on March 8th, creates a space to celebrate women's achievements and the progress made towards equality and empowerment. It also provides an opportunity to recognize the areas where significant challenges persist. And unfortunately, there is much room for improvement. The current global economic system continues to concentrate capital and exacerbate economic inequality. Men earn 50% more than women, and, according to Oxfam estimates, the value of the exploitation and marginalization of the poorest women and girls in low-paid or unpaid work amounts to a staggering \$10.8 trillion each year. This systemic injustice impedes girls' access to education, and consequently limits their opportunities for upward mobility to senior occupational positions, which perpetuates their inferior position in society.

Oxfam rightfully advocates for the need for governments to act now to build "a human economy that is feminist and values what truly matters to society". Expanding on this point, it is crucial to emphasise that going a step further to increase women's representation in leadership positions within governments is an essential part of the process towards an equal society. According to statistics from the Pew Research Center, of the 193 UN member states, only 13 have a woman as head of government. Moreover, just 59 countries, less than one-third of UN members, have ever had a woman leader. The latest Global Gender Gap Report highlights that, at the current rate, gender parity will not be achieved for another 131 years.

Plenty of evidence has long supported that the presence of women in leadership positions improves the position of women and girls in society.



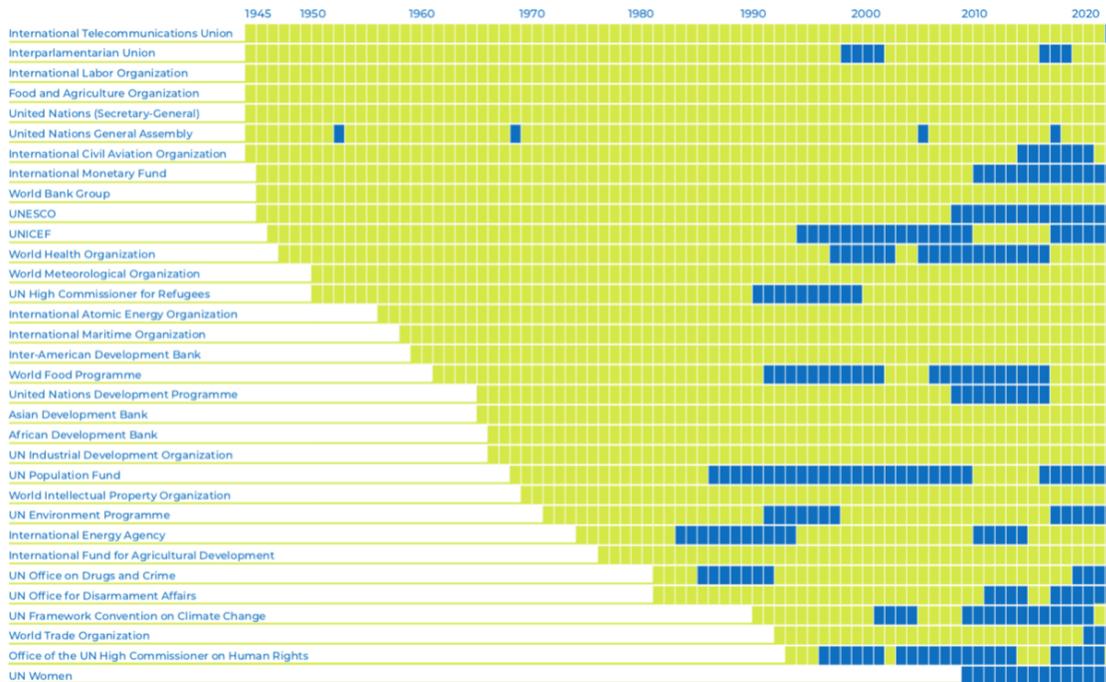
Women are more likely to represent the needs of other women, prioritising gender-sensitive policies which result in better opportunities and support. A 2023 report by Women Political Leaders (WPL), incorporated data from UN Women, World Bank, Oliver Wyman Forum, King's College London and many others, to highlight that the World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law (WBL) index, which measures legal equality of economic opportunity, clearly improves when more women are elected.

What's more, beyond benefiting women, the rest of society - and often the economy - also improve when women are in charge. Evidence confirms that states are less inclined to go to war when women have more political power as they favour international aid over military spending. Women have been shown to be key actors in conflict prevention and resolution, with the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least 15 years increasing by 35% when women participate. Studies have also revealed that women in politics prioritize policies that address access to clean water and sanitation. There are inextricable links between gender justice, environmental justice and racial justice. We cannot have one without the other, and with more women in charge we are more likely to achieve a more just world.

It is important to acknowledge the many efforts of NGO's, governments and international

organisations to foster a culture of empowerment for women. However, there is a risk that an increase in agency can sometimes result in a reverse effect due to neoliberal and postcolonial discourses that do not actually support women in their participation, but rather exploit them for their cheap labour potential. The more women in leadership, the less likely this disempowerment will be, since women politicians tend to implement democratic policies that genuinely meet the needs of women and girls.

Aside from governments, international institutions also possess a platform through which they can set standards and should therefore be committed to fostering parity in women's participation and leadership. A study by GWL Voices highlights the glaring absence of women leaders in the world's 33 largest global organizations (*see infographic below*). In fact, since 1945, out of all 382 leaders, only 47 have been women, representing a mere 12% of the total time. The same study also highlights that 13 of these organizations, including all four of the world's largest development banks, have never elected a woman as their leader.



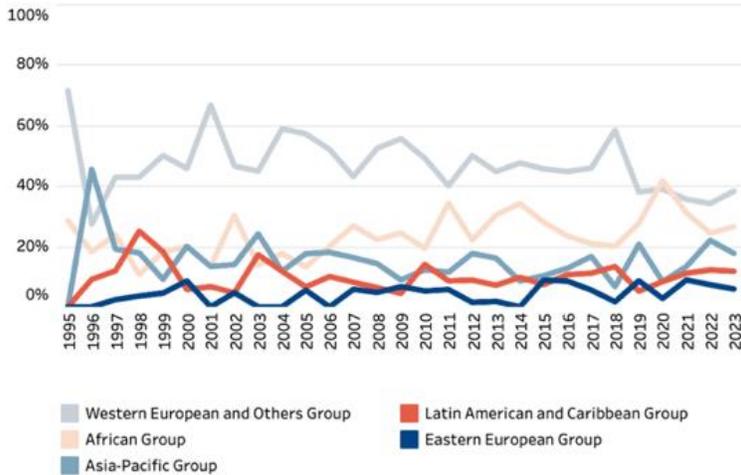
Fuente: GWL Voices (cuadros azules =mujeres líderes)

As the principal international institution, the United Nations bears a major responsibility for supporting the values of a democratic and just society; promoting the advantages of women as leaders, advocating for the girls’ education, and ultimately encouraging their participation at the highest levels of governance and international systems. It must be said that the efforts of Antonio Guterres, the Secretary-General, show positive progress towards parity in the UN workforce. After launching a 'system-wide parity by 2028' strategy in 2017, we have seen an increase in the appointment of women to senior positions. In 2023, for example, 53% of senior designations were women.

However, it is still a work in progress. Of the 31 members of the UN Board, only 13 are women. In addition, a closer look at the senior designations exposes the stark regional and economic contrast at play. The UN’s Western Europe and Other group, and the High-Income group undoubtedly enjoy the highest percentage of designations. Here we see the importance of an intersectional approach in revealing the reality of these statistics. Progress in general is clearly not globally represented, as Low-Income countries, and regional areas such as Eastern Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean continue to lag behind.



Appointments by UN Regional Group

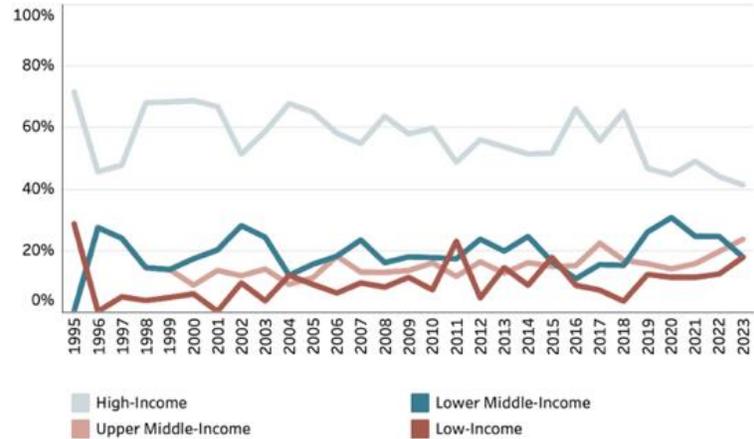


Fuente: NYU CIC

Appreciating that the socio-political context, economy, culture and patriarchal structures can negatively influence women's education, participation, and ultimately leadership, is fundamental. International organizations must take these additional challenges into account as they seek to improve their accountability with respect to gender parity. Achieving a more representative and intersectional equality clearly requires a different approach. Redirecting and concentrating support and funding with a view to fostering a deeper appreciation of the benefits of women in leadership and combating discriminatory attitudes, specifically where progress is lacking, holds promise in advancing gender parity.

This year's theme of International Women's Day is "Investing in Women: Accelerating Progress".

Appointments by Income Group



There is a shocking \$360 billion deficit annually in spending on gender-equality measures. Investing in the education and participation of women, especially in leadership positions, is not just a moral imperative in the pursuit of gender justice, but also a strategic imperative, as it will pave the way for a socially and environmentally better world.

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MARZO 2024

Published by



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