

Toward a “50-50 Planet” of Gender Equality: Q&A with Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka



[July 9, 2015](#) by [Andrea Ó Súilleabháin](#)

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka addresses participants in the International Women's Day March for Gender Equality and Women's Rights. New York City, March 8, 2015. (Devra Berkowitz/UN Women)

The renewal of the United Nations’ development goals for another 15 years provides a good timeframe in which to “bend the curve” to create a truly equitable world for women, according to Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women.

Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka, a former deputy president of South Africa, has advocated for the creation of nothing less than a “50-50 planet” in which women have equal representation across society.

“Since the sustainable development goals, the SDGs, have a timeframe of 15 years, between 2015 and 2030, this gives us a timeframe within which to have very ambitious goals,” she said.

“By 2020 in some areas, we should aim for 50-50, but certainly by 2030 we should aim to have reached a point where we have bent the curve of gender inequality downwards and in an irreversible manner, and 30% absolutely won’t do, because it would mean that we have come all this way in order to take baby steps.”

Speaking with the International Peace Institute’s Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka stressed the importance of women’s economic development as a means of preventing violence against women.

“When women are economically empowered and in better control of their own lives and destiny, they have the capacity to be more resilient,” she said. “They are able to take themselves and their loved ones, especially children, away from harm’s way.

“Women who are more educated, more empowered, are among the minority of those who live with violence, because the economic empowerment allows them the possibility to have choices.”

She said UN Security Council’s Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security was significant because it highlights the role of women as peacemakers and not just victims of war.

“When you have women involved, you are likely to have greater breakthroughs and more sustainable peace,” she said.

This discussion was part of a series of interviews done on the margins of the [Independent Commission on Multilateralism’s](#) fifth retreat, on women, peace and security, held on June 19-20.

As the 15th anniversary of Resolution 1325 approaches, what do you think are the key successes to celebrate?

One success is to celebrate the fact that the resolution was passed and that so many countries and women embraced the celebration and have been able, over the last 15 years, to highlight the role of women—not just the fact that women are victims of war, but that women are peacemakers, they are peacekeepers, they bring substance to the table, and when you have women involved, you are likely to have greater breakthroughs and more sustainable peace.

Think about the women in Liberia and the role that they played to bring peace to that country and women in Colombia and the role that they are playing, which is also positioning peace not just at the high table but at the grassroots level. More countries that are involved in peacekeeping are also now investing in the training of peacekeepers in a manner that is gender-sensitive. We have developed a mechanism to ensure that we can see the role of a gendered-approach in peacekeeping, but these are some of the highlights.

Amidst all of those successes, what are the largest gaps that remain?

The largest gap is that the number of women that participate effectively in peace negotiations is still minuscule. It's more of an exception than a rule, but of course even more worrying right now is the extent to which in all conflict areas, women are on the firing line and some of the extremists actually target women in the cruelest way.

In many countries, you know, to be a woman and a girl in a conflict area is more dangerous than being a soldier. So we are not in a good place and the different ways in which we are fighting against conflict has not reached a point where we actually realize that the approach has to factor that women are part of the collateral that is being targeted, and therefore, when we go to protect, when we go to fight terrorism, there's got to be a very deliberate way of addressing the challenges that women and girls are facing.

You've also said that women's economic empowerment can help prevent this violence against women. Have multilateral responses made this important link?

To some extent, but we still have a long way to go. When women are economically empowered and in better control of their own lives and destiny, they have the capacity to be more resilient. They are able to take themselves and their loved ones, especially children, away from harm's way. Women who are more educated, more empowered, are among the minority of those who live with violence, because the economic empowerment allows them the possibility to have choices. We know that when women are dependent on their families and their partners, what their partners and families want tends to be what dominates the women's lives, and we know now there's a lot of evidence to show that families don't always protect the interest of women.

In fact, if you think about honor killings, it is the family that is involved. If you think about the fact that domestic violence is the bulk of violence that women experience as high as 70%, that should tell you that the home isn't always a safe place for a woman. Economic empowerment will enable a woman to move away from the home, whether it is the home of her parents or a home with a partner.

In a recent speech you said, "We will accept nothing less than a 50-50 planet." What does this mean to you and how can the multilateral system move us toward a 50-50 planet?

I think there's a general trend we have to change which says that 30% is achievement when it comes to representation of women. This is internalizing and institutionalizing mediocrity because if women are more than 50%, as they are, 30% can be a nice score. We have to make a point that we recognize that in some cases where you start from a low base, when you reach a level of representation of women at 30%, yes, we've made progress, but this is not the ultimate.

We will accept that we've made a breakthrough, that we've made progress that is meaningful, that is consistent with what has to be achieved when we reach 50-50. We have got to count every step that we take is a step that is taking us towards 50%.

Since the sustainable development goals, the SDGs, have a timeframe of 15 years, between 2015 and 2030, this gives us a timeframe within which to have very ambitious goals, which must also be consistent with the size of the population called women and girls. By 2020 in some areas, we should aim for 50-50, but certainly by 2030 we should aim to have reached a point where we have bent the curve of gender inequality downwards and in an irreversible manner, and 30% absolutely won't do, because it would mean that we have come all this way in order to take baby steps.

We know enough now to take much bigger steps. We know that when we have special interventions, such as quotas and targets, we do progress. We also know that numbers aren't enough, that we must also look at the quality of the representation of women. We also know now that we have to look at the underlying structures that sustain both patriarchy and gender inequality. So when we talk about 50-50, equitability, and an equal planet, it's not just about the numbers, it's also about the quality of the change that we are aspiring for.

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UNITED NATIONSWOMEN PEACE AND SECURITY



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