

Opinion: What would a UN Feminist Agenda look like?

By Laura Turquet, Sarah Douglas 20 January 2017

As the new Secretary-General António Guterres takes over the helm of the United Nations this month, he faces a myriad of challenges, including violent conflict, terrorism, spiraling inequality, environmental degradation and diminishing democratic spaces. He must also grapple with the ongoing obstacles and threats to women's rights, participation and empowerment.

Despite decades of commitments, resolutions and platforms adopted by the world body, women and girls around the world continue to suffer from violence, exclusion, and discrimination, including within the corridors of the U.N. itself. Hard won gains for women rights are facing backlash all over the world. The U.N. Feminist Network, which brings together feminists working across the U.N. system and civil society activists that work closely with us, believes that the U.N. can and should do much more to walk its own talk on gender equality and women's rights.

The UNFN has come up with a Feminist Agenda for the new U.N. secretary-general, which we believe can help to bring about the changes needed. Our agenda ranges from measures to end impunity for violence against women, wherever it is found, to improve the funding and accountability of the work we do in the world, and to create a more equal and conducive internal working environment for women within the system.

1. End impunity for violence against women.

Among the most pressing issues are the ongoing allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse against peacekeepers and UN civilian staff, in fragile and conflict affected states.

High-profile cases in the Central African Republic have drawn global attention to this corrosive blight on the U.N. We also need to get our own house in order: Sexual harassment and discrimination in our workplaces must be rooted out.

To address both, we would like to see the appointment a prominent feminist justice expert to undertake a thorough audit of the U.N. internal justice system, to make concrete and actionable recommendations focusing on accountability of perpetrators, robust investigation processes, and the protection of whistleblowers and victims.

2. Increase funding to gender equality programming.

We urge the incoming secretary-general to demand agencies, funds and programmes increase and track resources available for gender equality work. Never have rhetorical commitments to gender equality among U.N. agencies and member states been higher, and yet the resources to do this vital work are too often lacking.

The U.N. agency devoted to the world's children, UNICEF, had annual funding in 2015 of over \$5 billion, while U.N. Women, tasked with realizing the rights of women and girls, had less than one-sixteenth of that total (just over \$300 million).

All U.N. agencies are responsible for gender equality and many have set targets, but most agencies don't properly track what they spend. Very few entities have reached the target of allocating 15 percent of all peacebuilding funds to gender equality, established in the secretary-general's Seven Point Action Plan on Gender-Responsive Peacebuilding.

3. Strengthen partnerships with women's civil society.

Our third recommendation is for strengthened recognition of the role of women's organizations in reaching gender equality. The women's movement is perhaps the most successful social justice movement of all time and their work with the U.N. has been absolutely critical over the decades in demanding accountability from member states and the U.N., ensuring that women's voices are heard, and putting new issues on the global agenda. With the possibility of a fifth world conference on women proposed for 2020, it will be essential for the secretary-general and his team to establish a dynamic working relationship with this key constituency and engine for progressive change.

To kick-start this, we propose that the secretary-general hosts an inclusive consultation with diverse gender equality organizations, to hear their priorities and concerns, in the margins of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York in March 2017.

4. Improve retention and promotion of women staff.

Finally, the U.N. Feminist Network encourages a raft of new measures to address working conditions within the U.N. system. It is extremely heartening that the secretary-general has committed to reaching gender parity at senior levels of the UN, and his personal appointments will be key. But to shift the needle on women's representation in the organization as a whole, and in a sustainable way, the underlying barriers to women's advancement at all levels will need to be addressed. Women's representation in the U.N. workforce consistently declines from entry to senior level, with the biggest drop-offs occurring at middle management level.

Tackling sexual harassment and discrimination is one part of this, but there is also much to be done to better support working parents of all genders and those with caring responsibilities. The U.N. should model global best practice on parental and care leave, as well as support for child care and flexible working practices.

However, it currently lags behind many countries in terms of maternity and paternity leave and ensuring equal access for LGBTI staff. The education grant provided to staff does not cover childcare costs, which tend to be borne disproportionately by more junior female staff, a dated throwback to the days when most U.N. diplomats were men and

had a wife at home to care for preschool children. The U.N. cannot exercise moral leadership and pressure member states to up their game if it is not leading by example.

Over the past few years, “feminism” has gone from being a misunderstood word, to something that many more women and men, including those in the highest positions of power are willing to associate themselves with. This is undoubtedly a good thing.

However, being a feminist is not a passive declaration, but an active commitment to forging change. While it is true that most people stand to gain from greater gender equality in the world, taking a feminist path requires courage. It means taking on vested interests, making tough decisions that will disrupt the status quo, and yes, for many leaders, that can feel uncomfortable at times. The U.N. Feminist Network is optimistic that the new secretary-general will be a feminist in both words and deeds, and we stand ready to support him in this essential mission.

Vivek Rai and Tolulope Lewis-Tamoka contributed to this article. The views reflected in this article are those of the authors only and do not represent the views of their organizations.