

From Representation to Renewal: What UNGA81 Tells Us About the Future of Multilateralism

UNGA81 took place at a moment when the multilateral system is under extreme pressure to prove its relevance. Across the General Debate and High-Level Week, we heard both a strong reaffirmation of international cooperation and a clear recognition that the system must change. We also saw renewed individual commitments to multilateral action, though these did not yet amount to a broader collective trend.

For GWL Voices, three messages stood out.

1 Advance women's leadership in a new multilateralism.

The selection of the next UN Secretary-General is a historic opportunity to rethink what leadership of the multilateral system should look like.

For the first time, a woman has a real possibility of becoming Secretary-General. This matters not simply because women represent half of humanity, but because leadership shapes priorities, political coalitions and the way institutions respond to a changing world.

After eight decades of male leadership, the question is not whether there are qualified women. There are. The question is whether the multilateral system is ready to translate its long-standing commitments to equality and representation into its highest office.

But a woman Secretary-General should not mean a *women's* Secretary-General. The challenge is to ensure that women's leadership helps place gender equality **inside the central priorities of the Organization** — peace and security, climate, technology and Artificial Intelligence, health, development and economic resilience.

This is not a gender agenda alongside the multilateral agenda. **It is part of the renewal of the multilateral agenda itself.** Precisely, we very much value group initiatives, unveiled during UNGA81, such as “A Call to Action for Renewed International Cooperation”, or the Accra Reset, each of which contributes in different ways to renewing and strengthening the multilateral system.

Support for UN institutional reform was overwhelming, as 154 of 197 interventions of leaders (78.2%) referred to it, in particular mentioning the need to change composition and representation of the Security Council.

2 Renew multilateralism through shared ownership.

The world has changed. Power is more diffuse, challenges move across borders and governments are no longer the only actors capable of shaping outcomes.

The UN remains indispensable because of its universality, legitimacy and convening power. But a stronger multilateral system will require an ecosystem of cooperation connecting governments with regional organizations, civil society, business, academia, cities, youth and other actors.



This also requires a different approach to representation. The Global Majority cannot be brought in at the end to endorse agendas designed elsewhere. Those who are most affected by global decisions must have a role in shaping them from the beginning.

This means moving beyond the traditional language of inclusion towards **meaningful participation and shared ownership.**

And, let's be clear, without women there is no significant transformation. Women must be part of that transformation — not as beneficiaries or a constituency to be consulted, but as political actors, decision-makers and leaders.

3 Turn multilateralism into delivery.



The credibility of multilateralism will ultimately depend on whether it can turn commitments into results.

Peace and security require greater investment in prevention, mediation and inclusive political processes — with women fully recognized as peacebuilders, mediators and decision-makers.

Climate action is moving from negotiation to implementation. Women must be at the centre of that transition, not simply represented at the table.

AI is already reshaping economies, societies and decision-making. Its governance must move from principles to implementation, with accountability for discrimination, exclusion and digital violence.

Young people also are actively shaping political and social change. Their participation must move beyond consultation towards genuine influence over decisions that will determine their future.

And gender equality itself cannot be treated as a sector that can be advanced or sacrificed depending on political circumstances. The growing pushback against women's rights is a test of whether the multilateral system is capable of defending the principles on which it was built.

From Commitments to Renewal.

UNGA81 has shown that the constituency for multilateral cooperation remains strong. But political support for multilateralism cannot be sustained by defending the status quo.

The task is to **renew the system: make it more representative, connect it to the wider ecosystem of actors shaping our world, and make it more capable of delivering.**

At GWL Voices, we believe women's leadership sits at the heart of that transformation.

The historic significance of a woman becoming Secretary-General would not lie only in who occupies the office. It would lie in whether that moment helps change **how leadership is exercised, who participates in shaping global decisions, and how the multilateral system delivers for people.**

The opportunity is not simply to put a woman at the top of the UN. It is to use this historic moment to renew multilateralism itself.

That, for us, is the challenge after UNGA81.

