

GWL Voices Insights

Madam Secretary-General: Women lead the race, yet explicit support remains scarce

By Andrea Ortega Carreño

September has been a key month for the GWL Voices campaign #MadamSecretaryGeneral. Of the seven remaining contenders, and despite Ms. Michelle Bachelet having withdrawn from the race, there are still four women candidates for the position of UN Secretary-General. More importantly, among the leading contenders, two are women: Rebeca Grynspan and Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett

However, equally important is the explicit support for a woman taking the highest position in multilateralism. In the General Debate at UNGA81, the numbers are not promising: only 15.2% of the speeches explicitly supported the election of a Madam SG.

What will it take to finally have a woman at the helm?

Limited support to a Madam Secretary-General

The explicit mentions of a Madam Secretary-General are becoming scarcer than in previous General Debates. At UNGA79, the Joint Statement from Slovenia, Mexico, Spain, and 78 other Member States, delivered by Slovenian Ambassador Samuel Žbogar, made Madam Secretary-General a clear call to action during the process of revitalization of the UN General Assembly, as highlighted in the [GWL Voices' Insights](#).

During the 81st session of the UNGA, out of the 197 speeches — 193 from Member States; one from the current UN Secretary-General, António Guterres; one from the President of the European Council, António Costa; and two from the current President of the UN General Assembly, Dr. Khalilur Rahman — only 30 (15.2%) explicitly supported the election of a woman as the next UN Secretary-General.

Looking in depth at these 30 supporters, 40% of them (12) corresponded to formal announcements of current candidates. Among these mentions, Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett received the highest number of explicit endorsements, with 10 mentions.

Latvia referred to the possibility of the next Secretary-General being either a woman or a man, but did not express an inclination towards a particular gender:

"The choice matters. The next Secretary General must defend the Charter with conviction. He must or she must uphold international law. That is what true leadership means. To speak up for the weak against the powerful, that is what true leadership means."
His Excellency Edgars Rinkēvičs, President of Latvia.

UNGA 81: Some talk the talk, but barely anyone walks the talk

On gender equality and women's leadership, UNGA81, just like previous editions, gave an uneven and worrying picture, both in terms of form and substance.

In terms of form, out of the 197 speeches given during the UN General Debate, only 14.3% were delivered by female speakers, accounting for 28 of the 196 people who spoke. This made women's participation almost anecdotal and far from equal.

In terms of substance, the picture becomes more concerning. The conversation around more equal opportunities for 'We the peoples' continues to decrease, following the same path identified in the Security Council Resolutions, as shown in the recent GWL Voices report, ["Words Matter"](#). Only 86 of the 197 speeches expressed explicit support for gender equality. This means less than half of the Member States (43.7%).

While these mentions were supportive and framed gender equality as an indispensable pillar for peace, human rights, and economic resilience, there were also countries with strongly negative mentions, criticizing the so-called "gender agenda" and reinforcing the concept of "traditional" families.

Meanwhile, only a third of the Security Council members explicitly supported gender equality in their speeches: 5 out of the 15 current members (33.3%), a percentage even lower than that of the General Assembly as a whole. These were Bahrain, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Latvia, Liberia, and Pakistan.

However, looking at these mentions more closely, most of them frame women as victims or passive actors, rather than as active leaders, and in relation to 'sexual violence' and/or terms such as 'vulnerable'.

One important exception came from Liberia, which spoke about gender equality in relation to leadership:

"Gender equality remains essential when women lead, peace agreements last longer, economies grow faster and governance becomes more accountable. Liberia remains committed to full political, economic and social equality for women and girls,"
H.E. Joseph Nyuma Boakai, President of Liberia.

Furthermore, explicit mentions and support become even scarcer when looking at women's leadership, and particularly at women's leadership in multilateral institutions. While 33.3% of the speeches at the General Debate supported women's political leadership (66 in total), the percentage drops to 20.3% when looking at speeches explicitly supporting women's leadership in multilateral institutions (40 in total).

Among Security Council members, women's political leadership was mentioned by only three members (20%), while women's leadership in multilateral institutions was mentioned by only one member (6.7%): the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a non-permanent member, in reference to the candidacy of Ms. Juliana Amato Lumumba for Secretary-General of the OIF:

"This same ambition is our driving force within the Francophone world through the candidacy of Ms. Juliana Amato Lumumba for the position of Secretary-General of the OIF with the vision of a renewed Francophonie that is closer to its peoples and capable of strengthening trust between its members and to tackle the challenges we are facing."
H.E. Judith Suminwa Tuluka Prime Minister at UNGA81.

A Mere Quarter of Representation

When looking at gender representation among speakers by region, no region achieved gender equality. The region with the highest female representation was the Americas (including North America, Latin America and the Caribbean), with 25.7% female and 74.3% male speakers. Meanwhile, Asia had the lowest female representation among its speakers, with 8.7% women and 91.3% men.

This shows not only the lack of equal representation, but also that even the region with the highest level of representation accounted for only a quarter of the speakers.

From representation to political support

The numbers tell a consistent story: women remain underrepresented both in the room and in the language used to define who should lead the multilateral system. While the presence of two women among the leading candidates marks an important development, explicit political support for a woman as Secretary-General remains limited, and notably absent from the Security Council during the General Debate.

UNGA81 therefore raises a question that goes beyond the number of women candidates: **if the multilateral system says it is committed to gender equality, where is that commitment when it comes to the highest position in the system itself?**

As the selection process moves forward, the gap between representation, rhetoric, and political support will be worth watching closely.