



THE PRESIDENT
OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

5 April 2019

Excellency,

Further to my letter dated 28 November 2018, I have the honour to enclose herewith the summary of the high-level event on 'Women in Power' held on 12 March 2019.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading 'M. ESPINOSA', which is a stylized representation of the sender's name.

María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés

All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York

Summary of the General Assembly high-level event on ‘Women in Power’

12 March 2019

Women’s equal participation and leadership in all spheres of life is essential to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

Yet, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions in every region of the world. In 2011, the General Assembly expressed its concern that women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women. The General Assembly also invited States to exchange experience and best practices on women’s political participation and encouraged States to support programmes that facilitate women’s participation in political and other leadership activities (A/RES/66/130).

In this context, the President of the General Assembly, H. E. María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, convened a high-level event on Women in Power to identify barriers that hinder women’s full participation and leadership, and to share best practices that can accelerate women’s empowerment in this area.

The high-level event was attended by six Heads of State and Government, including 5 out of 10 current women Presidents, and other senior government leaders, parliamentarians, representatives of the UN system, civil society and youth organizations. The high-level event featured an opening segment and three high-level roundtables.

Key Messages

Opening segment

In her opening remarks, the President of the General Assembly highlighted that the vast majority of countries have never been governed by a woman. The benefits of the participation of women in the exercise of political power and decision-making are undeniable. Currently, 90% of Heads of State and Government are men, as are 76% of members of parliament. Women in politics often face great barriers that range from resistance within their own parties to double standards and discrimination. Violence against women in politics is also a powerful weapon for deterrence and intimidation. The President called on all participants to join forces to strengthen the leadership of women in all spaces.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, underlined that gender equality is fundamentally a question of power as we still live in a male-dominated world and male-dominated culture. Gender parity is necessary to change power relations within societies and to advance peace and security, human rights and development for all. When women are at the table, the chance of sustainable peace increases. When women are excluded, we all pay the price.

The Chair of the Commission on the Status of Women, H. E. Ms. Geraldine Byrne Nason, emphasized that power means responsibility. Governments have the power and responsibility to work towards rights of women and girls and implement the necessary measure to achieve this goal.

The Executive Director of UN Women, Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, highlighted that for the first time in history, the President of the General Assembly, the Deputy Secretary-General, the President of ECOSOC and Chair of CSW are all women. Despite this progress, serious challenges remain. Only 10 countries have gender-balanced cabinets and only about 5% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women.

High-Level Roundtable on ‘How Women Leaders Change the World’ (Part I)

Participants of the high-level roundtable discussed the barriers and stereotypes women face based on their personal experience as decision-makers. The panel was moderated by Richard Lui, anchor at MSNBC. H. E. Dalia Grybauskaitė, President of Lithuania, emphasized that only 10 Presidents and 10 Prime Ministers in the world today are women. Many reasons account for this, including stereotypes and women who are afraid to leave their ‘security zone’ by entering politics. With new technologies, women can be more visible but they are also more exposed to attacks.

Rt. Hon. Bidya Devi Bhandari, President of Nepal, argued that discrimination against women is a social construct. Women are often undermined and their capability not recognized. There is a need for strong constitutional and legal provisions to ensure equality.

H. E. Paula-Mae Weekes O.R.T.T., President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, highlighted that 20 women have become Heads of State and Government in the Caribbean over the past decades. But inequalities still exist and they must be tackled immediately. With women in positions of power, we can have a gender-sensitive society that will allow us to reap the benefits of women’s talent.

H. E. Marta Lucía Ramírez, Vice-President of the Republic of Colombia, added that besides a robust framework, there is a need for a cultural change. The figures remain very low. In Latin-America, there is currently no female President. Women in power must pave the way for other women to follow in their footsteps.

H. E. Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, shared that women leaders face a lot of prejudice. Leaders have a responsibility to shape policies to empower women and to protect them from violence and discrimination. When women are empowered to have a seat at the table in peace negotiations, it is often easier to find a common ground. Diversity in institutions can also strengthen democracies. Women's leadership is therefore important to build a more secure and democratic world.

In her video message, H. E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, said that women in power are essential to create role models. Women must lead the way to address today's complex challenges, including climate change and violent conflicts.

High-Level Roundtable on 'How Women Leaders Change the World' (Part II)

The roundtable was moderated by Shery Ahn, anchor at Bloomberg TV. H. E. Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, President of Croatia, underlined that the underrepresentation of women in leadership is a serious democratic deficit. Women are agents of change. Peace processes that include women have more chance of success. Education and the media play a key role in breaking stereotypes that stand in the way of women's empowerment. Furthermore, countries with higher share of women in executive positions in the private sector are more prosperous.

H. E. Mrs. Kersti Kaljulaid, President of the Republic of Estonia, highlighted the role of media and civil society in changing mindsets. Universal healthcare and education are also key to achieve gender equality. The President underlined the importance of mentoring in promoting women's leadership.

H. E. Katrín Jakobsdóttir, Prime Minister of Iceland, emphasized that the structure of power was created by men which is why women are far too often absent where key decisions are made. Investments in shared parental leave, universal childcare and economic independence are key pillars of Nordic success for gender equality. As a result of recent movements, Iceland has implemented measures against sexual harassment.

H. E. Dr. Diene Keita, Minister for Cooperation and African Integration of the Republic of Guinea, highlighted gender-based violence as a serious challenge that continues to affect far too many women. She also underscored the importance of engaging boys to achieve gender equality.

H. E. Alain Berset, Federal Councillor, Head of the Federal Department of Home Affairs of Switzerland, underlined that equal societies are more competitive. More women in power changes the way decisions are taken. Women leaders in Switzerland advocated for policies such as universal health insurance, pensions and maternity leave.

In her video message, H. E. Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand, said that freedom from violence and pay equity are key to achieve gender equality. Women need to look after one another to boost the confidence of women and help other women become leaders.

High-Level Roundtable on ‘The Future of Women’s Leadership’

The roundtable was moderated by Folly Bah Thibault, Principal Presenter at Al Jazeera. Participants discussed best practices to accelerate progress in women’s leadership for present and future generations. H. E. Mary Robinson, President of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice and Chair of the Elders, highlighted the important role of mentoring. She also underscored the need to make space for young women, indigenous women and grassroots women to ensure diversity in women’s voices.

H. E. Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Chairperson of Qatar Museums, emphasized that gender inequality is a structural issue. For example, there has been a lot of progress in access to jobs for women, but current policies are not enough. Cultural barriers can change through education.

H. E. Marina Pendeš, Minister of Defence of Bosnia and Herzegovina, underlined that education and economic empowerment are key for women to realize their potential. She added that quotas are an important measure to give women the opportunity to exercise leadership. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, she worked to establish mandatory quota of women for admission in the army.

Ms. Muniba Mazari, Artist, Speaker and National Ambassador for UN Women Pakistan, said that gender equality is a basic human right. An empowered woman is a woman who empowers other women around her - to become the voice of those who are silenced.

Call for Action

At the initiative of the President of the General Assembly, 15 leaders who participated in the high-level event signed a ‘Call for Action’ to promote women’s leadership through concrete efforts in the areas of policymaking and advocacy. The Call for Action recognizes that women’s leadership is needed more urgently than ever to address global challenges from climate change to arms race and rising inequality. It identifies eight key areas to ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making. It also invites all women and men leaders to join forces and to act without delay to achieve gender equality for the benefit of all humanity.