



Achieving Gender Balance is Imperative for a Strengthened United Nations

The legislative framework governing the commitment to gender balance in the United Nations system is long-standing. Articles 8 and 10 of the Charter of the United Nations, for example, stipulate that there shall be no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate under conditions of equality in its principal and subsidiary organs. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights also states that there can be no distinction or discrimination on the basis of gender (Articles 2 and 23).

Acting on these principles, the General Assembly has repeatedly called for gender balance across the UN Secretariat and System at all levels. Most recently, on 4 February 2009, the General Assembly asked the Secretary-General to “review and re-double his efforts to make progress towards achieving the goal of 50/50 gender balance at all levels in the Secretariat and throughout the United Nations system.”

Despite these legislative frameworks and calls for action, gender balance throughout the UN has yet to be achieved. Indeed, at the current rate of progress, it is estimated that gender balance at the P5 level will not be reached until 2025. Failure to achieve this balance is greatly harming the work of the United Nations and threatens to undermine current efforts to strengthen the UN in order to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. The research is compelling: a gender-balanced work force is an imperative for success of any modern organization.

The connection between gender balance and organizational performance has been well documented in the private sector. Numerous studies have found that companies with a more balanced representation of women in their top management teams considerably outperform their counterparts with a lower representation of women at top levels.¹ Catalyst Inc., for example, has found that companies with a more balanced representation of women in their top management teams have a 35 per cent higher return on investment than companies with the lowest levels of women.² Women leaders are also encouraging to women in lower ranks and can potentially increase engagement and retention rates of female junior staff.³ Moreover, women leaders signify a broader and deeper talent pool.

Research has also proven that gender-balanced teams have greater potential for innovation and creativity, and contribute to better decision outcomes. Further, it has been proven that the more an organization mirrors the demographic it serves, the better equipped it is to meet its stakeholders needs. This is of particular importance for the United Nations.

As a standard setting organization, the United Nations has a particular responsibility to achieve gender equality within its own system. With moral authority on a global scale, the United Nations is expected to lead by example. Moreover, the Millennium Development Goals cannot be achieved without the full participation of both men and women in the work of the UN. The moral authority of the United Nations will be weakened if it is perceived to be communicating a message of “do as I say, but not as I do.”

There are opportunities on the horizon to improve gender balance, however. Over the next decade, for example, there will be an increasing trend in the number of retirements across the organization. Increased retirement rates present unprecedented opportunities for the recruitment and promotion of women. For example, between 1 July 2009 and 31 December 2013, 163 directors and 626 staff from the professional categories are expected to retire. Further, in the professional and higher categories (P-2 to D-2), 64 per cent of the anticipated retirees will be male.⁴

The Secretary General has repeatedly emphasized his commitment to achieving gender parity. Recently he has reasserted his call to action through a Policy Committee decision that attempts to strengthen accountability for gender balance across the organization. Through this decision, each Department and Office of the United Nations Secretariat must report on gender-related staffing issues through gender balance scorecards.

While achieving gender balance across the United Nations is absolutely possible, and great strides have been made in order to achieve the goal of 50/50 gender balance in recent years, a great deal is still left to be done. Achieving this goal will take a more proactive effort by all.

¹ See McKinsey and Company, *Women Matter: Gender Diversity, a Corporate Performance Driver*, 2007, and Lehman Brothers Centre for Women in Business, *Innovative Potential: Men and Women in Teams*, 2007.

² Catalyst, *The Bottom Line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity*, 2004. Available at: <http://www.catalyst.org/file/44/the%20bottom%20line%20connecting%20corporate%20performance%20and%20gender%20diversity.pdf>

³ Catalyst, *Advancing Women Leaders: The Connection Between Women Board Directors and Women Corporate Officers*, 2008. Available at: http://www.catalyst.org/file/229/wco_wbd_web.pdf.

⁴ For more gender balance statistics for the UN Secretariat and System visit the Office of the Focal Point for Women's website. A strategic action plan for gender balance across the UN Secretariat can also be found on this site