

United Nations Association

Westminster Branch

Campaigning for a strong, credible and effective UN



Gender equality and women's empowerment in the United Nations system and its Member States

Meeting: 27 July, Naval & Military Club, London, 27 July 2017

A woman as UN Secretary-General?

In 2016, efforts to encourage women candidates - and a successful one! - were led by the widely-supported *WomanSG.org* and in the UN General Assembly by the *Group of Friends for Gender Parity*, comprised 60 (now 130) Member States. At one time, there were seven woman candidates. But the UN faced a second, separate challenge, based on accusations over decades of lack of transparency in such elections. The *1 for 7 Billion* campaign, co-sponsored by UNA-UK, successfully led to public town-hall type meetings worldwide where candidates outlined their programmes if elected.

These two publicly supported but unconnected international campaigns, one underpinned by the need for women's equality and the other calling for increased transparency, managed to mobilise informed world opinion on the issue as never before. A man was indeed elected but only through his commitment to implementing a programme recognising the women's groups' demands. Upon his election, António Guterres set out to make good on one of his first promises: appointing equal numbers of women and men to top posts. Five out of his first nine appointments were women including Amina Mohammed, Nigeria's former environment minister, as Deputy Secretary-General, the third woman to hold this post.

The challenge remains formidable as in December 2016, women were under-represented among permanent representatives to the UN, at only around 20 per cent in New York and 27 per cent in Geneva. (Note: In January 2017, there were only 19 women Heads of State or Government and in 2015, women ministers represented only 17 per cent of ministerial posts.)

New Moves

In March 2017, the *Group of Friends for Gender Parity* met António Guterres, briefing him on the Group's work, and confirming support for his ambitious commitments. In May, the UN-Women and International Gender Champions launched its publication "*Raising women's voices in intergovernmental forums*" which re-stated that without the equal participation of women in decision-making at all levels, peace, development, human rights and justice cannot be achieved. Equal participation also ensures that women's voices and perspectives inform policies and actions. Member States of the United Nations have upheld and reiterated the rights of women to full, effective and equal participation in decision-making through various agreements and conventions and yet women remain underrepresented in all fields, especially at the highest levels. This publication aims to build knowledge on women's participation in national delegations to meetings of international organisations' governing bodies and their leadership roles in these meetings. It is based on responses to a questionnaire addressed to members of the United Nations Governing Bodies Secretariat and of the International Gender Champions-Geneva.

Although the results of the survey may not be representative of all United Nations organisations, they have yielded important information on the current policies and practices in the 23 entities that took part. Based on the responses, six types of actions to improve women's participation in governing body meetings have been identified: (a) explicit policies and mandated targets; (b) tracking and reporting; (c) training and capacity-building; (d) financial support; (e) advocacy and networking; and (f) communications strategies.

Not just the United Nations

Efforts in the UK to encourage a 'warmer welcome' to women seeking advancement in leading companies have been only patchily rewarded. By looking at company Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies and annual reports for 2017, we can determine the ratio between women and men for 399 corporate boards. Analysis of the data shows that the overall percentage of women on boards was around 22%.

The good news is that this is higher than the figure produced by a similar research exercise in 2013, when the overall percentage of women on boards was just 13%. The bad news, however, is that 16% of companies in the 2017 research sample had no female board members at all. Although this marks progress since 2013, when the figure was 33%, it is astonishing that so many boards continue to exclude women entirely.

Companies with equal numbers of female and male directors, or with female-led boards, were rare at not quite 4%, not much higher than the 2% found in 2013. The six companies that were female-led included a co-operative, a pharmaceutical group, a manufacturing company, an electronics company, an engineering firm and an information technology service provider. This list undermines the lazy claim from so many businesses that recruiting women to boards or senior management is too difficult in certain sectors, especially IT, science and engineering.

In government, the challenges are similar. Even though the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) was in 2013 named as one of the top ten public sector organisations for gender diversity and inclusion by *Opportunity Now*, the gender campaign from *Business in the Community*, *FCOWomen*, the FCO's staff association supporting women throughout their career, acknowledges difficulty in maintaining existing gender ratios, let alone advancing them.

What can we do?

UNA Westminster is proposing that, in recognising the pioneering role played by Dame Margaret Anstee, the first woman to attain senior postings in the United Nations, we initiate an annual programme to follow progress in this challenge, principally as experienced by those in the United Nations system.

An annual prestigious public lecture held in London would bring together those involved in and following the new Secretary-General's programmes to bring about gender equality and women's empowerment within the system and in its wider work. See (e) in para 1 above

In parallel, we would invite young women, either domiciled or studying in the UK, to submit proposals to study with UN field projects, rather than in major UN centres, for a period up to three months, paid for through bursaries. The report on their work would be formally presented at the annual lecture (see (b) in para 1 above). We would encourage applications to identify UN operations in southern Africa and South America, the two regions with which Dame Margaret Anstee was most closely associated. UNA Westminster has invited the government of Angola and its peoples who now enjoy a better life than when she served there as Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General to share ideas on the project.