

27 SEPTEMBER 2021

STRATEGIC ACTION FOR GENDER EQUALITY: AN AGENDA FOR THE FIRST YEAR

Dear Dr. Sima Sami Bahous:

Congratulations on your appointment to Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (UN Women). This Open Letter is an expression of support and a set of suggestions for your first 100 days and beyond, from a group of former UNIFEM and UN Women staff.

**We are writing
to offer our
support.**

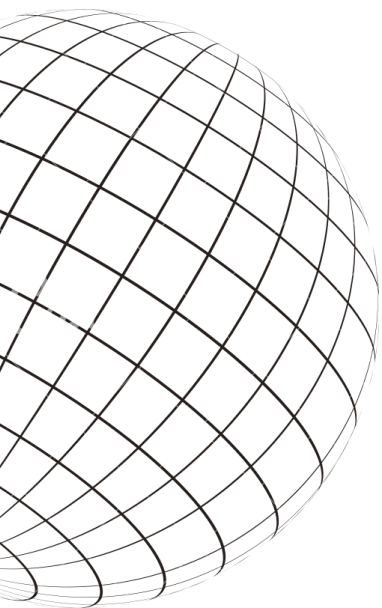
**We understand
the UN, its
constraints, and
UN Women's
potential.**

We are feminists who have worked inside and outside of the UN system for decades. Many of us advocated for the creation of the entity that became UN Women, particularly to achieve greater coherence, voice, funds and a leadership seat at the highest levels of the UN. Some of us were part of the transition team to shape UN Women. Some of us worked there for its first years and have subsequently consulted for and participated in many UN Women initiatives. We are not objective about what happens in its next decade. We care intensely. We all want to see deeply committed and courageous feminist leadership taking on entrenched resistance to gender equality within the UN and beyond, particularly now, when women's rights and girls' opportunities have been eroded by the COVID pandemic, by climate change, by conflict, and by the rise of authoritarian populists with misogynist agendas.

UN Women's task is to disrupt patriarchal power in the UN, in countries, and internationally, via the ways it delivers support, programmes and policy initiatives.

Its task is to use its seat in the UN's Senior Management Group and Executive Committee to center gender equality in everything that the UN does. This means:

- Building feminist coalitions across Member States, civil society, UN sister agencies and other actors that are committed to defend and advance women's rights against the current conservative backlash.
- Developing stronger tools to track the UN's own performance on gender equality and holding UN entities to account for failing to spend and deliver on women's empowerment.
- Empowering and strengthening UN Women's country offices and ensuring that UN Women's senior management team includes people with powerful feminist leaders with experience in advancing gender equality and women's rights.
- Practicing feminist leadership within UN Women and ensuring zero tolerance for abuse of authority, sexual and other forms of harassment in UN Women or anywhere in the UN.

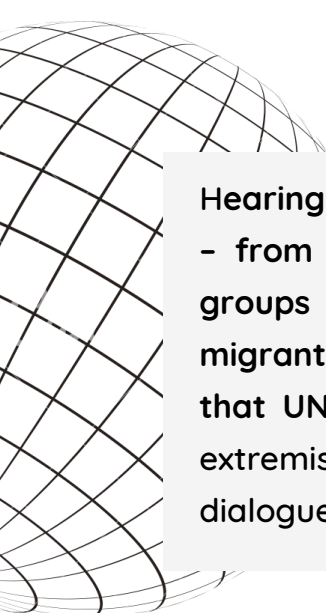


Its mandate requires feminist conviction and courage in UN Women's Executive Director.

We know that constantly prioritizing women's and human rights will trigger pushback and resistance from powerful colleagues, as well as conservative states and civil society groups. While this is uncomfortable and isolating, it is why you are there. You have a strong and massive constituency outside those rooms that will support you to speak truth to power.

Your first 100 days are an opportunity to hear the priorities of UN Women's vast constituency.

In the first 100 days of leadership, we hope you will spend most of your time listening with an open heart and mind to women in communities, women's rights defenders, feminist organizations and to UN Women's front-line staff. Your transition team should consist of experienced feminist leaders who know the UN. Listening to what communities of women in every region tell you about their priorities will bridge the distance between these communities and the 19th floor in New York.

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Hearing and amplifying the first-hand experiences of women's rights defenders - from women risking their lives for their rights in Afghanistan to feminist groups in Haiti to women leaders persecuted by authoritarian regimes or migrants and women fighting racism in donor countries -- is key to ensuring that UN Women delivers for gender equality even in the face of patriarchal extremism. Your own staff at all levels will appreciate a transparent and open dialogue to share what is working and what is not working internally.

This constituency will help you to set in motion overdue changes to UN Women's governance, political leverage, coordination tools, and internal systems.

1

AMPLIFY THE VOICE AND INFLUENCE OF FEMINIST CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE GOVERNANCE OF UN WOMEN AND IN THE UN SYSTEM.

Beyond listening, we believe that over the next year you can set in motion actions to address the structural constraints on UN Women's capacity to leverage the collective power of the UN for gender equality:

UN Women would not exist but for the advocacy of feminist movements around the world, which has created a sense of co-ownership of the institution by feminist civil society groups. However, its priorities are driven (or constantly questioned) by the UN Member States on its Executive Board, an unusually large 44-Member body that includes extremely conservative states that lately have questioned the feminist social change objectives driving UN Women's work. UN Women could secure much greater influence for women's rights advocates from civil society, grassroots groups and academia in shaping UN policies and processes for development, humanitarian emergencies and peace and security processes and reclaim the language of rights, gender-responsive and feminist transformative programming.

As Executive Director, you could propose formal representation of feminist civil society groups on the Executive Board. Many Member-States would support this move. We would also applaud more direct engagement of the CEB with feminist organizations.

2

LEAD AND SUPPORT NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND GLOBAL EFFORTS TO COUNTER THE PUSH BACK ON GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS.

UN Women must re-assert its primary responsibility is to co-deliver with feminist groups from the grassroots to national, regional and transnational organizations and networks.

Around the world, right-wing populists are getting electoral mileage from attacking women's autonomy and the very foundations of gender equality and women's human rights. Inter-governmental spaces have become a destination for civil society groups actively hostile to gender equality, to women's and LGBTQI rights, and to sexual and reproductive health and rights. We hope to see leadership by the UN Women Executive Director in reclaiming these spaces, resetting the tone, and making an unambiguous connection between the gender equality/women's rights agenda and the inequalities caused by multiple and compounding forms of gender-based discrimination -- race, ethnicity, age, non-binary and non-heterosexual sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).

Women's rights advocates should be represented on CSW's bureau.

3

**REVITALIZE,
STRENGTHEN AND
BUILD THE
COLLECTIVE POWER
OF THE UN'S
DEDICATED INTER-
GOVERNMENTAL
FORUMS AND
WOMEN'S RIGHTS
MECHANISMS
MANDATED TO
ADDRESS GENDER
EQUALITY.**

A feminist vision and voice must be central to all inter-governmental decision-making, from the Security Council to the Human Rights Council, and UN Women must ensure that these spaces welcome and incorporate visionary gender equality commitments. The CSW should be the most influential global space to annually assess gaps and gains in advancing gender equality and to insist on a forward-looking agenda for gender equality and women's rights. But the CSW needs reform and revitalization.

Financing pledges and action commitments from the Generation Equality Forum Commitments should be transparently monitored and reported on at CSW. Other inter-governmental processes (from the Peace Building Commission to the HLPF) should report at the CSW and advance change for gender equality across the UN.

4

REFRAME UN WOMEN'S COORDINATION FUNCTION TO ENABLE STRONGER ACCOUNTABILITY, RESOURCES, COLLECTIVE POWER AND CAPACITY FROM THE UNITED NATIONS.

As Executive Director you could insist on a harmonized gender marker for the entire UN system.



Your seat on the Secretary General's Executive Committee and Senior Management Team offers vital leverage to demand stronger commitment and delivery by sister UN organizations and to counter resistance to UN Women's leadership at country and regional levels. It is particularly important that you ensure that women's and girls' lives, health, bodies, work and time are a central focus of UN agencies' COVID recovery strategies. These strategies must address violence against women and reverse women's massive job losses and ensure their unpaid care work is rewarded and redistributed. You could insist on stronger UN Women influence on the UN Resident Coordinator System so that all RCs uphold commitments to parity, equality and women's human rights. Your leadership is also needed to hold the UN accountable for creating and implementing a feminist process for protecting staff and partners from sexual harassment and abuse, and protecting victims from retaliation after they come forward.

The SG and DSG have shown strong support for the gender equality agenda. They will welcome your advocacy to also insist on a long-overdue harmonized gender budget marker for the entire UN system. Without this, it will never be clear whether financing for gender equality is adequate or strategically and effectively deployed.

5

UN WOMEN HAS TO MODEL FEMINIST INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES INTERNALLY.

UN Women will only succeed if staff are supported by an organization that practices what it preaches. This requires investment in the organizational health of UN Women and its systems, organizational structures, and business processes in ways that include:

- a) Installing a zero tolerance policy to end bullying, abuse of power, sexual harassment and exploitation by staff members, and ensuring inclusion, diversity and difference;
- b) Prioritizing experience in feminist organizing and gender equality work in all recruitments, including UN Women representatives. Bringing strong gender expertise in gender equality to all UN tables at country, regional and global levels is UN Women's core contribution. The mantra that "we have enough feminists, what we need now are managers" should never be a key message for UN Women.
- c) Recruiting top notch feminist public administration professionals to review and recommend changes to internal procedures and Human Resources functions from a feminist perspective so that all staff and partners can thrive and so that UN Women provides flexible financial and technical support to feminist and women's organizations to maximize their operational autonomy. This will put UN Women on the frontlines of 21st century administrative systems that are efficient, effective and equitable as a model for other UN organizations.
- d) Challenging binaries and forms of exclusion that perpetuate entrenched and ineffective hierarchies and inequitable power relationships. That means addressing the inequities between 'national' and 'international' staff, phasing out irregular, short-term contracts and advocating for UN system-wide dispute resolution and justice systems that deliver for women's human rights internally.

UN WOMEN'S EFFECTIVENESS WITHIN THE UN SYSTEM IS GROUNDED IN CONSTANT VIGILANCE.

In its second decade, UN Women must realize the full potential of the powerful mandates it inherited. UN Women must be the space that women's rights advocates in every country can always count on. It has to be a shining example of how feminist leadership can inspire and transform the multilateral world, deliver unprecedented resources and protections for gender equality, and model intersectional and holistic approaches to economic justice, environmental sustainability, peace and security. It has to be capable of leading the UN through transformative gender change to ensure we can meet the commitments of the 2030 Agenda.

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How can we help you support the UN's gender equality work to rise above Member State differences?

Feminist advocates are understandably disappointed that proposals for an open and transparent process of recruiting the ED for UN Women were ignored by the UN's leadership. We look to you, as the new leader of UN Women, to make it clear that gender equality advocates are respected. We are at the halfway point toward the SDGs, and recovering from a pandemic that has revealed stark discrimination based on gender, class, race and ethnicity. Many women's rights advocates are asking: Is UN Women the voice of the world's women and girls yearning for equality? Can it re-energize an outdated UN bureaucracy? The actions in your first year as the new UN Women Executive Director will be watched closely by women's rights constituencies around the world.

We, the undersigned, reiterate our support and continued commitment to the success of UN Women in realizing its mission. We are at your disposal to discuss the suggestions in this letter in greater detail and we hope you would welcome a virtual dialogue with us early in your first 100 days. We will be in contact with your office to request a consultation with this group and other former staff members who share high aspirations for UN Women's success.

cc:

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