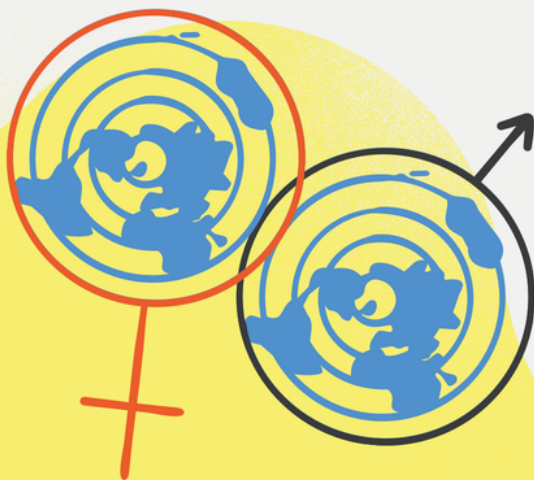




The next UN Secretary-General from a Global South perspective:

Legitimacy, effectiveness and a historic
opportunity for gender equity



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ABSTRACT

This policy brief examines why the selection process for the next UNSG matters for strengthening the effectiveness of the organization amid the current crisis of multilateralism and the historic opportunity presented by the 2025–2026 appointment cycle. It argues that a more participatory and transparent process, together with the appointment of the first woman Secretary-General, can reinforce legitimacy, independence, and institutional responsiveness. From a Global South perspective, the brief prioritises responses to unequal power structures in global governance. Methodologically, it combines a qualitative review of academic and policy literature with analysis of UN resolutions and political positions by actors from Latin America and the Caribbean.

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Introduction

The multilateral system is facing a crisis of legitimacy and effectiveness, evident in its difficulty responding to interconnected crises —armed conflict, social inequalities, and the climate crisis— and in the persistent gap between global norms and real-world outcomes. In recent years, multiple agendas and reform processes, such as UN75, Our Common Agenda, and the Pact for the Future have converged around a similar diagnosis: the need for a more inclusive, participatory, networked, and results-oriented multilateralism, capable of rebuilding trust and delivering outcomes.

The upcoming appointment is a historic opportunity for the UN to choose, for the first time, a woman Secretary-General.

The weakening of multilateralism is not only an external perception; it is visible in the system's day-to-day practice. Faced with recurrent deadlock, even the permanent members of the Security Council increasingly resort to ad hoc arrangements, parallel coalitions, or mechanisms outside the formal framework.

While this dynamic may be understandable amid frustration over the lack of results, the proliferation of fragmented responses undermines the collective capacity to manage systemic risks. In a context of deep interdependence —from the climate crisis to health security or financial stability— an “every country for itself” approach may offer short-term tactical exits, but it is structurally inefficient when confronting challenges that, by definition, require sustained coordination and joint action.

Against this backdrop, the legitimacy and convening power of the Secretary-General's leadership have become strategically important for rebuilding spaces for cooperation where fragmentation now prevails. The selection of the next UN leadership in the current 2025–2026 appointment cycle therefore emerges as a strategic decision, with direct consequences for the system's credibility.

The formal framework provides that the Secretary-General (SG) is appointed by the General Assembly (GA) upon the recommendation of the Security Council (SC). Given the political weight of the office—and the risks associated with opaque processes— **how the selection is conducted matters as much as who is ultimately appointed.** In line with the standards promoted since 2015 to increase transparency (for example, resolution A/RES/69/321), advancing greater openness, accountability, and participation can enhance the legitimacy of the outcome and equip the next leadership with a stronger mandate to drive reform.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief examines why the selection process matters for strengthening the effectiveness of the United Nations amid the crisis of multilateralism, while also arguing that the upcoming appointment is a historic opportunity for the UN to choose, for the first time, a woman Secretary-General.

The brief advocates for a more participatory and transparent process that—together with women's leadership—can reinforce legitimacy, independence, and institutional responsiveness, and better align the Organization's leadership with the values the UN promotes.

From a situated perspective, it also seeks to amplify Global South voices and priorities in the face of unequal power structures in global governance, with the aim of shaping public debate on the kind of UN leadership the future demands.

Methodologically, the brief draws on a qualitative review of academic and policy literature on gender equality, institutional legitimacy, and multilateral governance, combined with an analysis of key UN resolutions and reform documents related to the Secretary-General selection process. It also traces joint positions and public statements from Latin American and Caribbean actors to identify how regional perspectives—particularly from the Global South—have articulated demands for greater transparency, gender equality, and geographic balance in UN leadership.

Better aligning UN leadership with the values the Organisation promotes is therefore a condition of political authority and long-term credibility.

Selection process for the Secretary-General

Beyond the formal rules

Under the UN Charter, the Secretary-General is appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council. The process for the next appointment cycle began in late 2025, when the President of the GA and the Security Council formally invited Member States to submit candidates.

This opens a phase that combines intergovernmental political bargaining with public moments of assessment, such as the presentation of credentials and visions, and exchanges with Member States and civil society.

Focusing solely on the selection of the Secretary-General overlooks a central governance issue: the ecosystem of senior leadership that surrounds the mandate of the incoming officeholder.

A system under strain

While the institutional mechanism is clear, the way the competition unfolds ultimately shapes the legitimacy of the outcome.

The procedure continues to face persistent deficits in transparency, inclusion, and accountability. The institutional design and prevailing practices give the Security Council a particularly decisive role at the recommendation stage.

As a result, key decisions are processed through political bargaining and deliberations that are not always visible to the broader membership (1 for 8 Billion, 2025).

In this context, the scope for meaningful influence by all Member States is limited, especially when there are no comparable criteria and sufficiently open mechanisms to assess and contrast candidates' profiles.

The institutional design shapes not only who reaches the Secretary-Generalship, but also how the political-technical team that leads key areas is assembled and how priorities are translated into operational decisions.

In contexts of high fragmentation and political crisis, the UN's legitimacy and institutional responsiveness depend to a large extent on whether this wider leadership architecture is perceived as competent, diverse, and independent.

Over 20% of top appointments are held by nationals of P5 countries

Recent analyses highlight the concentration of senior UN posts: between 1995 and 2022, the P5—permanent members of the Security Council—held over 20% of top appointments (Blue Smoke, 2023).

Strengthening transparency standards and verifiable criteria for selecting the Secretary-General can therefore serve as an entry point to discuss rules, practices, and expectations regarding the composition of the broader senior leadership.

It is also important to consolidate the gender dimension from the nomination stage onward. UNA-UK, for example, proposes that the General Assembly call on Member States to consider only qualified women candidates and to encourage joint nominations.

This approach would use the space provided by resolution 75/325 to broaden political support from the outset (1 for 8 Billion, 2024).

This would make it possible to link the transparency agenda more explicitly to the historic opportunity to correct women's exclusion from the UN's highest leadership (UNA-UK, 2023).

Procedural improvements are not only about making the process more open; they are also about strengthening the governability conditions for the next Secretary-General.

Process shapes legitimacy

A process with more predictable rules, explicit criteria, and greater public traceability reduces uncertainty about how support is built, limits opacity in the validation of candidacies, and strengthens perceptions of institutional impartiality.

This can directly shape the kind of mandate with which the elected candidate begins their term: the stronger the legitimacy at entry, the greater their capacity to build coalitions, sustain reform agendas, and withstand cross-pressures in a highly fragmented geopolitical environment.

Mandate through transparency

At the same time, a more transparent and participatory selection can help clarify expectations about the office.

Clarifying in advance which attributes are valued —integrity, coalition-building capacity, executive experience, independence, and commitment to the Charter and to equality— does not constrain politics; it improves the quality of intergovernmental debate and expands public scrutiny.

Strengthening the legitimacy of the appointment process does not, by itself, guarantee better outcomes, but it does create more favorable conditions for the next leadership to exercise authority with greater credibility, coherence, and room to maneuver.

Transparency is not merely a procedural matter; it is a political condition of the mandate with which the next leadership will govern.

Current debates indicate that there is still room to strengthen rules, evaluation criteria, and mechanisms for meaningful civil society participation (UNA-UK, 2023).

Some Member States have proposed options for a more substantive role for the General Assembly.

For example, through mechanisms to express preferences, and for increasing the visibility of Security Council practices (1 for 8 Billion, 2025).

In parallel, civil society coalitions continue to press for integrity and inclusion standards that help safeguard the independence of the office and the legitimacy of the process (1 for 8 Billion, 2025).

Equality in diversity

Strengthening leadership and effectiveness in times of crisis

Against this backdrop, the persistent gap between the principles the United Nations promotes and the actual practices of its power structures erodes its credibility. The underrepresentation of women in the spaces where agendas are set, consensus is negotiated, and international bureaucracies are led is one of the most visible expressions of this tension. It is therefore a problem of institutional legitimacy and, by extension, of real capacity to lead reform.

The current crisis of multilateralism is not only about resources or coordination; above all, it is a crisis of trust.

The diagnosis is stark. A review of 54 international organisations since 1945 shows that only 13% of their leaders have been women. The picture is similar at the United Nations: of roughly 2,800 recorded appointments of Permanent Representatives, only 7% have been women. In addition, 73 countries—more than one third of Member States—have never appointed a woman to that post, and another 64 have done so only once (GWL Voices, 2025). These figures not only reveal persistent inequality; they also point to elite reproduction patterns and closed circuits of diplomatic and political careers, shaping which voices enter—and which are systematically left out.

Most importantly, this underrepresentation coexists with an explicit normative mandate. The UN Charter established early on that the Organization should impose no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate, on equal terms, in its principal and subsidiary organs.

The gap, therefore, is not explained by a lack of principles, but by the way informal rules operate in practice: rules that shape who gains access to decision-making positions and under what conditions.

Bias is embedded in institutions

In 2021, through resolution 75/325, the General Assembly invited Member States to take into account the absence of women's leadership in the Secretary-Generalship when putting forward nominations. This acknowledgement highlights the gender bias that the selection process has carried for more than eight decades (UNA-UK, 2023).

Organisations do not operate as neutral arenas, but are built around assumptions about career paths, fitness for office, and performance standards historically associated with masculinized norms (Acker, 1990).

In feminist literature on organisations and institutions, this dynamic is understood through the recognition that institutional structures are gendered.

These assumptions become embedded as informal rules that are reproduced through norms, practices, routines, and hierarchies. They structure access to power through influence networks, tacit eligibility criteria, and gatekeeping mechanisms.

These dynamics often restrict entry into decision-making spaces (Lovenduski, 1997; Krook & Norris, 2014; Freidenberg, 2020).

In turn, they function as mechanisms of selection and exclusion that reproduce power asymmetries (Acker, 1990; Krook & Norris, 2014).

Gender inequality is not seen as an external distortion affecting an otherwise neutral system, but as an endogenous outcome of institutional design and everyday operation.

Applied to the Secretary-General selection process, the combination of concentrated decision-making, closed-door interactions, and low public traceability tends to favor profiles that are more acceptable to dominant actors and to reinforce patterns of institutional continuity.

As a result, the absence of a woman at the apex of the system over eight decades is interpreted not as an issue of individual merit, but as evidence of structural barriers and cumulative biases in the mechanisms through which leadership is selected and validated.

Arguing that this is the moment for the United Nations to appoint a woman Secretary-General is also grounded in institutional performance considerations in a context of crisis.

Leadership that is consistently aligned with the principle of equality strengthens the Organization's normative authority to demand coherence from states and other global actors.

Evidence also suggests that women's substantive participation in decision-making can improve process quality, broaden agendas, and contribute to more sustainable outcomes, particularly in conflict settings, through observable mechanisms such as trust-building, coalition expansion, connections to grassroots networks, and the prioritization of enabling conditions for peace, which are often underrepresented when negotiations are confined to political elites or armed actors (Rose et al., 2017; Stone, 2014).

One way to translate this argument into organizational capacity terms is through a diversity-and-efficiency lens: broadening the composition of teams and leadership not only corrects representational bias, but also improves diagnosis and decision-making by incorporating diverse trajectories, information, and lived experience.

Diversity improves outcomes

Progress toward substantive equality is associated with human capital accumulation and more inclusive growth; closing gaps in participation and job quality expands the potential for economic and social development.

While the multilateral system does not function like a national-scale labor market, the underlying logic is transferable: Institutions that systematically exclude half the population weaken their capacity to interpret complex problems, innovate in their responses, and sustain public legitimacy (Brest López & Díaz Langou, 2018).

The Secretary-General operates in constant tension between political leadership, diplomatic mediation, and bureaucratic management.

Global South voices

New perspectives in times of change

Amid this debate, Global South countries have been advancing a clearer agenda that links geographic balance, gender equality, and a more open selection process as necessary conditions for rebuilding legitimacy. Recently, coordination among states to address the Organization's historic leadership gap has increased.

At least 94 states have expressed the intention that the next leadership be the first woman to hold the office, and 145 countries have, in different ways, raised concerns about the lack of gender balance in UN leadership.

These positions suggest that gender equality is no longer framed only as a sector-specific demand, but increasingly as an explicit component of the broader discussion on institutional legitimacy.

After eight decades without appointing a woman Secretary-General, leadership practice remains misaligned with Charter commitments to sovereign equality and representative governance.

From Latin America and other regions of the South, the crisis of multilateralism is understood not only as a coordination problem, but as a persistent gap between universal norms and real implementation capacity.

It is grounded in political and institutional experience in contexts of high inequality, recurring fiscal constraints, debt crises, climate exposure, and human security needs.

In that context, the call for a woman Secretary-General connects to a broader reform agenda: strengthening legitimacy requires leadership able to read these tensions from the ground, rebuild trust, and translate universal principles into effective cooperation, especially where the costs of multilateral ineffectiveness are borne most intensely (Global Policy Watch, 2024).

Regions are shaping leadership agendas

The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), for example, formalized this position in a ministerial declaration stating that the time has come for the region to assume responsibility for the Secretary-Generalship, in line with the principle of equitable geographic balance and with the aim of strengthening diversity in the system's leadership (CELAC, 2025).

Politically, this stance seeks to reposition the region as an agenda-setting actor in a context of global crisis, while also challenging the notion that multilateral priorities are defined within concentrated circuits of power.

In that context, several public statements by regional leaders connect both dimensions—gender and region—within a single renewal argument.

The debate is also amplified through networks of former officials and leaders with multilateral experience: a statement released in July 2025 by former foreign ministers from the region argued that:

From the Global South, the leadership debate is also linked to substantive priorities: access to concessional finance, a more predictable debt architecture, climate adaptation, and food security.

Leadership that is attentive to these dimensions can help translate structural demands into effective spaces for multilateral negotiation.

Taken together, these interventions place the claim within a broader frame: the Global South is not only demanding greater representation, but also rules that are more consistent with the principles the UN upholds. A process that credibly integrates gender equality and regional balance can help rebuild trust—not as a concession, but as part of a strategy for institutional effectiveness. In times of accelerated change, the question of who leads—and how that decision is made—ultimately reflects a contest over the direction of multilateralism: which problems are prioritized, which costs are tolerated, and which values become verifiable in global governance practices (Just Security, 2025; CELAC, 2025).

It is time for a woman to lead the UN and that Latin America and the Caribbean has candidates capable of bringing new perspectives to global governance.

Concluding remarks:

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A historic opportunity

Looking ahead to the 2025–2026 appointment cycle, the possibility that the United Nations will, for the first time, select a woman Secretary-General should not be read as a symbolic gesture, but as a decision with potential impact on the Organization's political authority and long-term credibility.

In a context of eroding trust, coherence between the principles the UN promotes, and its leadership practices becomes a central component of legitimacy. Moving in this direction can strengthen the starting position of the next leadership to advance reforms and deliver results in a global environment marked by deep fragmentation, overlapping conflicts, and systemic challenges.

The significance of leadership does not end with symbolism. In the short and medium term, the Secretary-General will have to operate in an environment shaped by great-power rivalry, pressure on the international financial system, accelerating climate impacts, and overlapping armed conflicts. In this context, the ability to build broad coalitions, sustain channels of dialogue even amid polarization, and connect security, development, and climate agendas will be decisive. The selection of the next leadership will therefore shape not only the system's legitimacy, but also its real room to coordinate responses to global risks that no state can manage alone.

At the same time, the challenge is not only who holds the office, but under which political conditions. How the next leadership is selected will affect the strength of its mandate: a more open, traceable process with comparable criteria can broaden the legitimacy base and safeguard the independence of the role. This is especially relevant if the appointment of a woman is to be accompanied by realistic yet ambitious expectations regarding coalition-building capacity, integrity, and the authority to lead institutional change.

Recent evidence and debate suggest that diversity in decision-making spaces can improve deliberation quality and coalition-building, particularly when institutions confront complex, simultaneous problems. In that sense, selecting a woman Secretary-General can serve as a turning point to modernize not only representation, but also the standards of legitimacy and performance by which multilateral leadership is assessed.

Recommendations

Considering the diagnosis presented, strengthening the legitimacy and effectiveness of the next Secretary-General's appointment requires combining concrete procedural reforms with political decisions aimed at correcting persistent representation biases. The following recommendations are designed to be feasible within the current cycle, without requiring amendments to the UN Charter.

Short term

01

Define public, comparable criteria to assess candidates: the General Assembly should promote minimum evaluation criteria (integrity, executive experience, coalition-building capacity, commitment to the Charter, leadership in complex contexts, and gender equality). This does not remove politics, but it improves debate quality and public scrutiny.

02

Strengthen the General Assembly's substantive role ahead of the final recommendation: Member States should advance mechanisms to express preferences more systematically (e.g., non-binding consultation or political signaling modalities), to broaden the process's legitimacy and help rebalance existing asymmetries.

03

Embed gender equality from the nomination stage: Member States should prioritize nominating highly qualified women and explore joint nominations to broaden early political support. Regional blocs can reinforce this signal through explicit political positions.

Recommendations

Medium term

01

Link the Secretary-General selection to standards for senior UN leadership: the Secretary-General debate should open a broader agenda on diversity, geographic balance, integrity, and fitness for office across senior leadership, to prevent opaque practices from eroding the legitimacy of the mandate.

02

Ensure meaningful civil society participation: civil society engagement should have clear rules, sufficient time, and mechanisms to synthesize inputs. This strengthens process legitimacy and improves scrutiny of independence and integrity.

03

Promote Global South coordination around a common reform agenda: Regional blocs should articulate positions that combine gender equality, geographic balance, and procedural improvements. This increases influence and turns representation demands into a concrete global governance proposal.

Centro de Implementación de Políticas Públicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento

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CIPPEC is an independent, non-profit think tank based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It improves public policy through research, analysis, and engagement with government, civil society, and the private sector. Its work focuses on areas such as democratic institutions, public management, and social and economic development. In this report, CIPPEC contributes a strong focus on transparency, institutional design, and the role of inclusive processes in strengthening legitimacy in leadership selection.

CIPPEC is a member of **Southern Voice**, a network of Global South think tanks working to amplify evidence-based perspectives in global development debates, and participates in the **1 for 8 Billion** campaign as a Campaign Partner, contributing research to inform the selection of the next UN Secretary-General.

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