



EGM/2015/Report

## Equal Representation of Women through the Lens of Leadership and Organizational Culture

Expert Group Meeting

Organized by

United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women  
(UN Women)

In collaboration with the World Meteorological Organization (WMO)

Geneva, Switzerland  
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\* The views expressed in this document are those of the experts and do not necessarily represent the views of the United Nations.

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## I. Executive Summary

The UN General Assembly has called upon the United Nations system to advance its work towards achieving the goal of gender balance in staffing at all levels, as women continue to be underrepresented within top UN leadership. Yet, to measure and advance gender equality and the empowerment of women, it is necessary to look beyond numbers, though they are the most evident indicators. These efforts must also be reexamined through the lens of leadership and organizational culture, prerequisites to sustained equality in all its aspects, including the representation of women.

Experts worldwide increasingly acknowledge that regardless of how many systems and policies are put into place, enacting an organizational cultural shift that enables the meaningful representation of women is predicated on effective leadership. Along with this comes recognition of the need for proactive strategies to develop leaders with the skills, capacity and awareness to meet the strategic objectives of gender mainstreaming.

Institutional practices that strengthen leadership capacity for and through an inclusive and enabling organizational culture may contribute to a more effective strategy to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women across the UN system. The landmark United Nations Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-SWAP), preparing for its second phase of development under the leadership of UN Women, provides a unified accountability framework through which these practices can be promulgated.

Given this understanding, UN Women, in collaboration with the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) convened an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on advancing the equal representation of women in the workplace through the lens of leadership and organizational culture. The objective of the meeting was to assist the United Nations in exploring the most current and reliable research, analysis and good practices on the topic. The EGM's findings concerning leadership and organizational culture fitting the purpose of gender equality are discussed at length in this report. The resulting recommendations offer concrete strategies for UN Women to incorporate leadership into the next phase of UN-SWAP performance indicators, as they pertain to the status of women and their equal representation in the United Nations system.

### A. Impact of Leadership and Organizational Culture on Gender Equality in the Workplace

“Leadership and advancing gender equality are interconnected, as the very nature of gender mainstreaming requires organizational change that ultimately calls for effective leadership<sup>1</sup>.”

- UNDP Gender Equality Seal

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP Gender Equality Seal, “Leadership fitting the purpose of gender equality: “Next Generation,” prepared for UN Women Expert Group Meeting, 6 – 8, October 2015, Geneva, Switzerland.

For the purpose of his report, leadership can be defined comprehensively as a process by which an individual can direct, guide and influence the behavior and work of others to achieve a common goal.

The concept of leadership is very subjective and researchers have theorized for many years what makes leaders effective. Initial research examined leadership as inherent in particular individuals, based on their personal/innate traits. Theorists later shifted their studies towards specific behaviors of a leader (i.e. leadership styles) as the best predictor of his or her leadership success. Others have gone further to say that there is no one best style of leadership. Rather, it depends on the specific needs of a particular situation or organizational context.

While there is no absolute formula for the perfect leader and each theory has its uses and limitations, experts have been able to draw from various theories to identify core traits and behaviors most fitting the purpose of gender equality. Personal qualities identified include passion, honesty, open-mindedness, adaptability and emotional intelligence. Also identified were behaviors associated with transformational, distributed and inclusive styles of leadership, as well as facilitative leadership and adaptive leadership.

No one organization or individual practices a particular style 100%; however, understanding these different approaches to leadership will enable gender champions to develop resilience in the way they assert leadership for the cause of gender equality and women's empowerment. It also provides a framework of competencies that can inform efforts to develop the leadership capacity of employees at every level to support organizational change for gender equality.

Organizational culture is defined as the set of beliefs, assumptions, norms and values that are shared by members of an organization and is influenced by its past, environment, and industry<sup>2</sup>. Significant research demonstrates that organizational culture can either help or hinder progress towards gender equality goals. Beyond behaviors and policies, leadership for gender equality must become embedded into the culture, structures and systems of the organization, reinforced as a core value lived every day by the leadership on down. In addition, in order for leaders to effectively champion gender equality, they must possess the required knowledge and skills to contribute to an organizational culture that is diverse, inclusive and supportive of women's and men's personal and professional development.

These findings, revealing the complex nature of gender-transformation change, point to the need for leadership capacity development and organizational change to be reexamined in order to support the transformation necessary for sustained equality in the workplace, including the representation of women.

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony H. Normore & Cristina Trinidad, C., "Leadership and gender: a dangerous liaison?" *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 26 No. 7, 2005 pp. 574-590. Accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/01437730510624601>.

## B. Recommended Workplace Strategies

Drawing from EGM findings, following is a summary of recommended workplace strategies which aim to prepare leaders within the UN system with the skills, awareness and support needed to meet the strategic objectives of gender equality. The various tools, techniques, and types of knowledge proposed should form part of any comprehensive capacity development plan fitting the purpose of gender equality, including increasing the representation of women at all ranks.

- **Distributed Leadership Capacity Development:** Develop leadership capacity for gender equality at three main levels: i) senior managers; ii) gender focal points; and iii) staff in general.
- **Formal Training:** Incorporate gender equality considerations into leadership training and leadership into gender-specific modules using a long-term transformative learning approach.
- **Awareness-Raising on Unconscious Bias:** Educate men and women about conscious and unconscious bias, not only in their attitudes, but in their internal organizational practices and assumptions which might have a differential impact on male and female staff careers.
- **Mentorship, Coaching, and Sponsorship:** Offer special programs to support the career advancement of women, which may include women's mentoring, coaching, women-specific training and/or development of informal women's networks.
- **Organizational Culture:** Proactively embed the mutually reinforcing values of leadership development and gender equality into the culture of an organization, starting with the commitment and consistent messaging of senior executives. Extend buy-in for gender equality.
- **Performance Evaluation:** Monitor, evaluate, and recognize the performance of leaders in promoting gender equality and inclusive leadership through formal and informal accountability mechanisms.

These proactive strategies will help organizations to meet the prerequisites of gender parity by supporting inclusive and transformative leadership practices and an organizational culture fitting the purposes of gender equality,

## II. Report on Equal Representation of Women through the Lens of Leadership and Organizational Culture

This report provides information on the mutually reinforcing elements of leadership and organizational culture to promote sustained equality in the workplace, including the representation of women. It summarizes EGM findings, building upon discussions, individual papers and research prepared by the experts on specific issues for the meeting, and good practices successfully implemented within the UN and at other organizations worldwide.

### A. Introduction

A central part of UN Women's mandate is to lead, promote and coordinate the accountability of the United Nations system's work on gender equality and the empowerment of women. This includes supporting UN system entities to make progress towards the General Assembly goal of gender parity in staffing, of which organizational culture constitutes a fundamental component.

While progress has been made within the UN in achieving this goal, the pace has been slow. In 1995, the United Nations General Assembly called for 50/50 gender balance at all levels of the United Nations Secretariat by the year 2000. However, fifteen years after the target date, women continue to be underrepresented within top UN leadership. Despite the fact that women make up 41.8% of the whole organization, the percentage of women decreases the higher up the ranks. Though the UN has attained or exceeded parity within lower level positions (P-1 and P-2), representation remains under 35% in senior level positions<sup>3</sup>.

A new target date for gender parity within the UN has been set to 2030; yet, without concerted effort to advance the pace of change, at the current rate, according to UN Women, it may take until 2041 just to reach parity in P-3 levels.

The implications of maintaining this gender gap are far reaching. Not only does the United Nations fail to live up to its own mandate for gender equality; it also fails to benefit from the unique perspectives, values and abilities that come with women's full participation at all levels of decision-making and governance. Moreover, it sends a discouraging message to women within the UN of their own chances of career advancement, and to men and women around the world, who look to the UN as a standard-setting organization.

While sex-disaggregated data on staffing is the most evident indicator for gender equality and the empowerment of women, to more effectively measure and advance transformative gender change within the UN system, it is necessary to look beyond numbers. These efforts must also be reexamined through the lens of leadership and organizational culture, prerequisites to sustained equality in all its aspects, including the representation of women.

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<sup>3</sup> UN Women, Coordination Division. Progress towards Gender Parity in the United Nations System, Summary of SG Report A/69/346, 2015. Accessed October 28, 2015, [Link](#).

Increasing research has shown that regardless of how many systems and policies are put into place, enacting an organizational cultural shift that enables the meaningful representation of women is predicated on effective leadership. With this comes recognition of the need for proactive strategies to develop leaders with the skills, capacity and awareness needed to meet the strategic objectives of gender mainstreaming, as well as an enabling culture that allows all employees to succeed.

In order to contribute to a deeper understanding of leadership, its link to organizational culture, and its relevance to the General Assembly goal of 50/50 gender parity in staffing at all levels by 2030, UN Women, in collaboration with the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), convened an expert group meeting (EGM) from 6 to 8 October, 2015 in Geneva, Switzerland.

The meeting was attended by a range of independent experts with significant experience supporting gender equality initiatives within the United Nations, as well as in the government, non-profit and private sectors. In addition, approximately 70 representatives from 40 agencies attended the meeting.

The EGM sought to foster collegial support and strong partnerships to leverage and lead change for gender equality and the empowerment of women throughout the UN system. To contribute to this goal, experts were assigned to facilitate constructive dialogue; provide cutting-edge research and analysis; and identify good practices related to developing leadership and an organizational culture fitting the purpose of gender equality and overall inclusion in the workplace.

Based on EGM findings, this report makes recommendations to develop institutional practices to strengthen leadership and organizational culture fitting the purpose of gender equality and the empowerment of women throughout the UN system. Recommendations focus on the core components of a comprehensive leadership capacity development plan for gender equality. They also set a path forward to integrate these lessons on leadership into the second phase of the landmark United Nations Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-SWAP)<sup>4</sup>.

“Today, more than ever, urgent and sustained action is needed to transform the structures, institutions and norms – economic, political and social – that are holding back progress on gender equality. These systemic changes must be deep and irreversible.”

- Dr. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka Under-Secretary-General Executive Director, UN Women

available at: [“BEIJING + 20: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE The Representation of Women and the United Nations system.”](#)

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<sup>4</sup> Adopted in 2012, the UN-SWAP provides a unified accountability framework for the United Nations to achieve its goals for gender equality and the empowerment of women. It outlines 15 agreed performance indicators focused on gender balance in staffing, including human resources, gender architecture and organizational culture.

## B. The Interconnection between Leadership and Gender Equality

According to the UNDP Gender Equality Seal (2015), “**leadership and advancing gender equality are inter-connected, as the very nature of gender mainstreaming requires organizational change that ultimately calls for effective leadership.**” At the same time, gender equality has been framed as an instigator for leadership, supporting not just gender equality in itself, but all efforts towards progress, innovation and social change.

For the purpose of this report, leadership can be defined as a process by which an individual can influence the behavior and work of others to achieve a common goal.

Gender mainstreaming can be described as the means by which leaders achieve the goal of gender equality. This includes taking actions to improve gender balance among staff.

In beginning a discussion on the leadership needed within the UN for effective gender mainstreaming, experts began by examining *what* ideas, values and processes are being mainstreamed in gender mainstreaming, including:

- **Women as decision-makers** about social values and development directions (agenda-setting)
- Gender equality is recognized as **not just a “women’s issue” but a societal one**
- Gender equality goals **influence mainstream economic and social policies** that deliver major resources
- **Gender equality is pursued from the center** rather than from the margins
- The legitimacy of **gender equality and women’s empowerment as fundamental values**

The ability to mainstream such ideas, values and processes within an organization depends highly on effective leadership. Within the context of the UN’s efforts to mainstream gender equality considerations, experts began by observing *how* individuals within UN entities are promoting gender mainstreaming through the practice of leadership fitting the purpose of gender equality. The following section summarizes these observations, drawing lessons from leadership theory.

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