

PROGRESS IN A PANDEMIC: TOWARD FEMINIST LEADERSHIP IN A TIME OF CRISIS

A Report Card on the Secretary-General's Fourth Year from the Feminist U.N. Campaign

KEY MESSAGES

The [Feminist U.N. Campaign](#) created its initial report card in early 2017, in response to Secretary-General Guterres declaring himself a “feminist” as he took the helm at the United Nations. Since then, it has measured the extent to which the Secretary-General advanced progress toward a more gender-equitable world and U.N. system across six recommendations.

In a year where progress could have easily stalled or been reversed, the Secretary-General's focus on gender equality remained or perhaps even increased in light of the pandemic—earning him his highest score to date.

- The overall 2020 rating of ‘B’ recognizes the Secretary-General's improved commitment to a feminist leadership agenda and his leadership on gender in the context of COVID-19, including by mandating gender analysis as a condition for his new COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund.
- Guterres's scores actually increased in three of the six areas of the U.N. Feminist agenda (feminist leadership and agenda-setting; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and freedom of information) and went down in two (financing for gender equality and enabling a feminist transformation for CSW and UN Women). In the area of parity and rights protection, the score stayed the same, reflecting mixed results in that category.
- The Secretary-General made 14 speeches in 2020 devoted entirely to the issue of gender equality (equal to last year) and increased references to gender in other remarks—an uptake of the Feminist U.N. Campaign's recommendations. His rhetoric also grew more radical, incorporating feminist analysis of the power and institutional dynamics underpinning discrimination.
- The SG made a strong push on combatting violence against women in the context of COVID-19, calling it the “shadow pandemic.”

Despite immense progress and attention to gender equality in the context of COVID-19, our 2020 assessment revealed stalled or lost momentum in other parts of the Feminist U.N. Campaign's agenda.

- There was a notable lack of rhetorical attention and new updates in 2020 with regard to rooting out sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse—an earlier priority for the Secretary-General. UN Women's executive tasked with this agenda, Purna Sen, even stepped down from her position in August claiming these issues were “put on the back burner.”
- Although more than two years have passed since the establishment of a High-Level Task Force on Financing for Gender Equality, the Task Force principals and co-chairs never convened with its civil society Advisory Group and its process has been beset by delays

and cloaked in secrecy. A leaked concept note from its inception in 2018 reveals a considerable decrease in ambition over the years.

As the pandemic prompted a move to virtual spaces for several U.N. gatherings, there were missed opportunities to enable more meaningful civil society participation and foster greater transparency.

- Participation by civil society in major convenings like the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) became even more complicated as events moved online—a trend that appeared across the board in the U.N. system and that merits deeper examination.

We now have enough data to observe trend lines, which indicate overall progress from 2017 to 2020. Secretary-General Guterres has made great strides in prioritizing rhetoric, action and commitment on gender equality in line with Campaign recommendations.

- **The SG has maintained a consistent focus on gender equality in his speeches and rhetoric—though rhetoric and action on race and intersectionality could have been stronger.**
 - The content of the SG's speeches has become more substantive over time, examining and critiquing structural and systemic barriers to equality and embracing sexual and reproductive health and rights.
 - In his speeches and social media content, Guterres often reaffirms gender as binary and fails to speak in depth about the effects of racism, LGBTQIA+ rights, adolescent girls, disability and intersections of multiple identities.
- **The SG has received consistent high scores for his commitment to feminist leadership, in particular for his efforts to promote gender parity.**
 - Since taking office, gender parity has been one of primary focus areas for the SG, who is on track to achieve the goals he set out for himself in this area. (In 2019, the U.N. attained gender parity in its Senior Management Group and among its Resident Coordinators, who are designated by the Secretary-General to lead U.N. Country Teams. On January 1, 2020, it reached gender parity among all ASGs and USGs, not including specialized agencies.)
 - Amid such progress, key informants highlighted several concerns: a perceived lack of accountability across the wider U.N. system; a gender gap outside of senior management positions; and the risk of conflating gender parity with gender equality more broadly.

Trend lines also reveal key barriers to implementing a feminist agenda where the SG's leadership could be stronger: decreased financing overall, pushback on women's rights globally and insufficient inclusion of civil society.

- **Funding:** Despite clear initial intent to make a public push for increased financing for gender equality, the deliberations, implementation plan and any associated progress for

the High-Level Task Force on Financing for Gender Equality remain largely opaque. The SG has also failed to advocate for full funding for U.N. Women.

- **Slow or stalled progress:** Efforts to transform the U.N. System and ensure parity have begun, but have been met with backlash internally as the U.N.'s organizational culture lags behind with respect to its commitments
- **Insufficient inclusion of civil society:** Across all six priority areas, meaningful and inclusive engagement with civil society has been a consistent area of critique.

In his fifth and last year of his first term, Secretary-General Guterres has an opportunity to make 2021 the banner year for gender equality and women's rights that 2020 was supposed to be and see through the implementation of his commitments to gender equality. In his final year, the SG should:

- use his platform to continue encouraging member states to prioritize women and girls in their COVID-19 response and recovery plans;
- pick back up work to root out—and hold accountable—sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse;
- drive forward implementation on the Call to Action for Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda;
- **demonstrate his clear commitment to strengthening the U.N.'s gender equality architecture, including through directing system-wide commitment-making in the Generation Equality Forum;**
- champion efforts to increase transparency and promote as much expansive and inclusive participation of civil society as possible—ensuring their voices are amplified and secure throughout U.N. deliberations, events and convenings; and
- make financing for a gender-equitable recovery a cornerstone commitment of his campaign, to include sending a clear signal to his High-Level Task Force on Financing for Gender Equality that it must complete its work.