

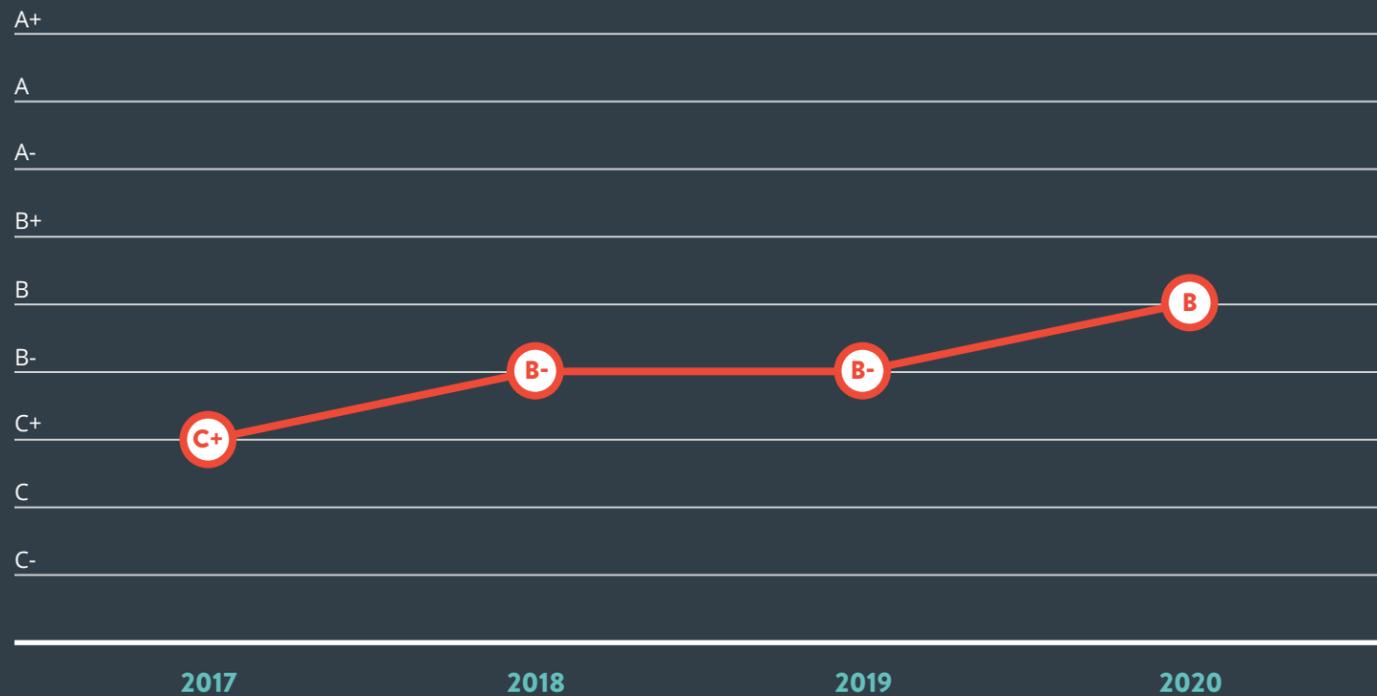


# PROGRESS IN A PANDEMIC: TOWARD FEMINIST LEADERSHIP IN A TIME OF CRISIS

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

# INTRODUCTION

## OVERALL REPORT CARD GRADES FROM 2017-2020



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For gender equality and for the United Nations, 2020 was supposed to be a year of celebration and reflection. The United Nations would celebrate its 75<sup>th</sup> year. UN Women would commemorate its 10<sup>th</sup> year. Women’s rights activists would mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security would look back on 20 years. And with 10 more years to realize the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2020 presented an opportunity to call for increased action and more urgent implementation where progress was lagging.

But 2020 took us by surprise. The onset of a global pandemic exacerbated inequality, shattering any sense of normalcy and placing life’s most ordinary pleasures out of reach. The world in 2020 was flipped upside-down, nearly unrecognizable—and the effects on women and girls were particularly harmful.

As UN Women reports, “The impacts of crises are never gender neutral, and COVID-19 is no exception. While men reportedly have a higher fatality rate, women and girls are especially hurt by the resulting economic and social fallout. Impacts on women and girls have worsened across the board.”<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated violence against women; a loss of earnings, livelihoods and educational opportunity; the burdens of unpaid care and domestic work; and lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services.<sup>2</sup>

As the crisis unfolded and lockdowns

began as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was set to convene, it became clear: for the United Nations and its leadership, 2020 was hardly the year for global celebrations of progress and commitments to increased ambition. The milestones we had looked forward to were delayed, canceled or considerably scaled down.

This involved a resetting of expectations for gender equality advocates who had campaigned with increasing fervor over recent years and had aligned around the key moments and anniversaries of 2020 with tremendous anticipation, and with a long list of demands of the Secretary-General himself and the U.N. system, writ large.

Four years ago, as the United Nations prepared to pick a new leader, member states and women’s rights advocates alike were clamoring for female and feminist leadership at the United Nations. It was in this context that the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) convened a group of feminist thinkers,



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advocates and U.N. experts to imagine a transformative and progressive agenda for women's human rights and gender equality in the U.N. system, anticipating it might have its first female Secretary-General (SG).

The General Assembly ultimately appointed António Guterres, who, while not a woman, proclaimed himself “a proud feminist.” This and other statements by the SG indicated that he had potential to be a champion for feminist reforms throughout the system, and so the Feminist U.N. Campaign was born.

In 2016, the Campaign released its flagship report, *Toward a More Feminist United Nations*, delineating an agenda for then incoming Secretary-General Guterres.<sup>3</sup> The Campaign adapted these recommendations into an initial 100-day framework, as well as actions the Secretary-General could implement over the course of his five-year term. These include six key points: (1) articulate and implement a feminist leadership agenda, (2) ensure feminist implementation and accountability for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), (3) finance for gender equality, (4) utilize feminist leadership through parity and rights protections, (5) enable a feminist transformation for the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and UN Women, and (6) promote the freedom of information in the U.N. system.<sup>4</sup> Each year following, the Campaign has issued a report card grading the Secretary-General's progress against this agenda.

Following a strong rhetorical performance in his first 100 days,<sup>5</sup> the SG has struggled to secure the kind of transformation imagined in the 2016 agenda. Following Guterres's first year in office, he scored highly in his efforts to achieve gender parity and respond to violence and sex-

based harassment in the U.N. system. But he lagged behind in fostering greater freedom of information, ensuring feminist implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and transforming key gender equality institutions and convenings—like UN Women and the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)—into stronger, more inclusive bodies and resources within the wider U.N. system.<sup>6</sup>

Following his second year, in 2018, Guterres again scored highly in promoting gender parity and prioritizing the elimination of violence, discrimination and abuse in the U.N. system, particularly in the wake of the #MeToo and #AidToo movements. The Campaign noted improvements in the Secretary-General's efforts to advance feminist implementation of the SDGs and promote greater freedom of information. However, progress still lagged. Most notably, gender equality initiatives and actors remained vastly underfunded.<sup>7</sup>

In 2019, the Campaign noted “a year of incremental progress” with “no measurable increase or decrease” compared to the previous year. While his public messaging on gender equality substantially increased in frequency, the Secretary-General turned much of his attention to internal processes and outcomes. Those included continued focus on gender parity, the High-Level Task Force on Financing for Gender Equality and preparations for 2020 as a key anniversary year for both the U.N. system and women's rights globally. However, as we reported in 2019, “the choice to focus on internal processes to ‘get our own house in order’ resulted in an understandable perception by observers inside and outside of the U.N. of decreased momentum on the overall agenda, particularly in the context of

severe funding shortfalls and backlash on initial efforts.”<sup>8</sup>

And what of 2020? How to assess progress in a most extraordinary year? Is it fair to evaluate against the same criteria when, for instance, one of our scored criteria is strong leadership at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which was largely suspended?<sup>9</sup>

In truth, we considered punting to 2021 and electing not to publish the annual scorecard. But, ultimately, we decided that in a year that threatens to reverse decades of progress on gender equality, this is no time to let leaders off the hook on these issues. Rather, we must press our case ever more urgently.

So we shall.

For 2020, the Feminist U.N. Campaign once again measures to what extent the Secretary-General advanced progress on our proposals for a more gender-equitable world and U.N. system, even and especially in the midst of a most turbulent year. We revisit our six priority recommendations, assessing progress and setbacks in each area.

**Overall, we find that Secretary-General Guterres responded to the exigence at hand, both recognizing and prioritizing the gendered effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.**

He regularly cautioned against increased levels of violence against women—calling for peace worldwide and “at home”—incorporated a gendered analysis in his policy recommendations to member states and issued a standalone policy



brief on gender, the first in a series of thematic briefs on the crisis. Perhaps most importantly, he also integrated a gender marker in the U.N.'s COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund, making program funding in its second call for proposals contingent upon support for gender equality and women's empowerment.

**Indeed, despite a year in which progress could have easily stalled or been reversed, Guterres's scores actually increased overall and in three of the six areas on our agenda, resulting in a B overall—his highest grade in the past four years, although still offering room for improvement.**

Specifically: the SG's scores increased over last year in the areas of **feminist leadership and agenda-setting**, reflecting his leadership for gender equality in both diplomatic and funding responses to the pandemic; **feminist implementation for the SDGs**, where he did a better job of clearly linking the SDGs to the women's human rights agenda and called out Goal 5 and targets such as sexual and reproductive health and rights in the of the Decade of Action; and **freedom of**

**information**, again due to increased transparency around the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund and increasing telecast and virtual meetings in the wake of the pandemic.

Scores remained the same in one area, on **parity and rights protections**, where he is ahead of schedule, and went down in two: **financing for gender equality** and **enabling a feminist transformation for CSW and UN Women**. Two important notes here: On financing, the SG's strong leadership on the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund would have taken his score up rather than down had the Campaign not uncovered, in the course of this year's research, a Concept Note outlining a significantly increased level of ambition and transparency that was initially planned for one of his signature efforts in this area, the High-Level Task Force on Financing for Gender Equality (HLTF). This document revealed that, at least initially, the SG's plans for the Task Force included a number of Campaign asks: increased resourcing for gender equality, civil society input and public dissemination of report findings and recommendations. However, interviews

with U.N. officials and comments from his Executive Office continue to insist that this is an internal-facing Task Force with no mandate to increase financing for gender equality, and no clear plans to disseminate any information with regard to the Task Force—from membership to recommendations—to the public, an unfortunate development and one that has undermined pandemic-related progress where financing is concerned. Finally, on the CSW, we elected not to score the SG this year given that the CSW was largely canceled, scheduled as it was to convene in March, just as global lockdowns were beginning.

Zooming out a bit from the Secretary-General himself to consider overall trendlines in the larger system, there is one important lesson from 2020 that merits deeper examination, not only by the SG and his leadership team, but also by the various agencies, officials and member states operating throughout the system: as the pandemic necessitated a move to virtual modalities for a number of U.N. meetings, events and processes—a move that is likely to endure to some degree even after the pandemic chapter

has at last come to a close—we found, across the board, missed opportunities to enable greater civil society access and foster greater transparency, two critical components of our Feminist U.N. agenda. **As lobbies closed so too did valuable opportunities for information exchange and influencing on the margins of negotiations and debates, with no digital mechanism designed to accommodate this.** For every event or forum we tracked, advocates and academics alike expressed frustration that meetings were still scheduled in Eastern Standard Time, designed to accommodate New York participation, even though participants no longer were physically required in New York. In a year that could have transformed colonial and Western-centric approaches underpinning U.N. processes and events, civic space seemed more constricted than ever. Particularly following the global protests that erupted against racism and white supremacy, the U.N. as an institution and the SG as its leader must confront these intersecting issues head-on.

Looking ahead to 2021, which marks the fifth and final year of Secretary-General

Guterres's first term and the rescheduled celebration of the Generation Equality Forum,<sup>10</sup> all eyes are on the Secretary-General to make this the banner year for gender equality and women's rights—as well as intersecting human rights issues that came to the fore in 2020, like racism—that 2020 was supposed to be.

**We urge Secretary-General Guterres to make his commitment to gender equality a centerpiece of his campaign for reelection, using his fifth year in office to cement progress to date, embrace outstanding areas of our agenda and set a strong expectation either for himself or for his successors to achieve or exceed.**

In his first year in office, Guterres proclaimed, “Do not let us in the UN off the hook.”<sup>11</sup> The Feminist U.N. Campaign took that request to heart. While we commend the Secretary-General's efforts, we recognize that a feminist U.N. system is still far from reality. As such, we repeat the Secretary-General's words back to him: “Keep pushing. Keep inspiring. Keep making a difference.”<sup>12</sup>

The fight is far from over.

**It is important to note** that this assessment evaluates the Secretary-General's progress against the Campaign's recommended agenda, not his own. The goal and intention of this effort is to seed ideas for the SG's action that would lead to necessary transformation within the U.N. system, giving credit where he has taken up civil society's ideas and calling attention where he has not. As we saw in those first, historic days, this is a Secretary-General who

is listening to civil society's calls for feminist leadership and is willing to take good ideas on board. We insist that our six action areas are equally worthy of his attention and will continue to push for their consideration and uptake. For even if Secretary-General Guterres does not act on all of our recommendations, some future Secretary-General might, and in the spirit of forward momentum and future progress we will continue to present them. We also recognize that

the Secretary-General is not solely responsible for effecting the recommended changes, and there are a number of factors beyond his control—not the least of which are political undercurrents surrounding this era of decreasing resource flows, intensifying ethno-nationalist and misogynist sentiments undergirding the rise of authoritarian governments, and ongoing reforms that reflect and manifest these trends. Our order is, therefore, an admittedly tall one. Nonetheless,

as an institution born out of international crisis, in direct response to authoritarianism, and chartered specifically “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small,” we believe the United Nations is up to the task and hence present our progress assessment as an appropriate and essential call to action to realize these founding ideals.