

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres
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Remarks at the opening of the 63rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

This is the Commission on the Status of Women.

But it could equally go by another name: the Commission on the Status of Power.

Because that is the crux of the issue.

Gender equality is fundamentally a question of power.

For millennia, women have been systematically marginalized, ignored and silenced, in a male dominated world with a male dominated culture.

I recently came across an interesting book by the Cambridge historian Mary Beard. It highlights how deep patriarchal roots in Western culture help explain deep power imbalances today.

I believe the same also applies to other regions of the world.

The truth is that, in the celebrated classics in ancient Greece and Rome, speech was quite literally defined as the business of men.

Homer begins his epic with the son of Odysseus telling his mother to shut up and go back to weaving.

Aristophanes wrote a play about women leading the state. It was a comedy.

And, of course, we know that this isn't ancient history.

You may be familiar with a cartoon of a group of executives sitting around a conference table – all men, one lone woman.

The woman has just made an important point – followed by a long pause.

In the cartoon, finally, the boss pipes up and says “that’s an excellent suggestion, Ms. Triggs. Perhaps one of the men here would like to make it.”

I suspect many of you have had similar experiences.

Today, let us be clear about what needs to change.

As Professor Beard has written: "If women are not perceived to be fully within the structures of power, surely it is power we need to redefine rather than women."

I thank you for leading that change and thank you for raising your voices.

We need you here, and we need you now. And we need you more than ever.

I will be frank.

Our world is a bit lost.

Now, and I can recall my experience as a driver. I know men sometimes have difficulties recognizing when they get lost.

We don't like to admit it.

We have trouble asking for directions and trouble even looking at a map.

Well, the fact is that our world today needs direction, and I know you can help guide the way.

Sometimes it feels like we are travelling at full speed ... in both directions at the same time.

People are more connected, yet societies are becoming more fragmented.

Big challenges are growing outward – climate change, insecurity, conflict.

Yet people are turning inward.

More than ever, we need global responses to global challenges.

Yet more than ever, multilateralism – international problem solving – is under fire.

You are living that paradox, too.

After all, advocates for gender equality are mobilizing like never before.

You are building global movements. Raising awareness. Inspiring change.

At the same time, something else is happening.

And we must tell it like it is.

Around the world, there is a pushback on women's rights.

That pushback is deep, pervasive and relentless.

We witness increased violence against women, especially human rights defenders and women running for political office.

We see online harassment and abuse of women who speak out.

In some countries, homicide rates are going down – but murders of women are going up.

In others, we see a rollback of legal protection against domestic violence or even female genital mutilation.

As the ILO just found, women last year were 26 percent less likely to be in employment than men. Fewer than one-third of managers are women – even though they are likely to be better educated.

We all know women's participation makes peace agreements more durable, but we still struggle to make sure women are included in negotiating teams.

Even governments that are vocal supporters of this agenda fail to back their words with action where it counts.

Meanwhile, we see wide and persistent digital divides – an ongoing uphill battle for reproductive rights – terrible endemic sexual and gender-based violence.

And nationalist, populist and even austerity agendas are tearing the social fabric – aggravating inequality, splintering communities, curtailing women's rights and cutting vital services.

We have a fight on our hands. And it is a fight we must win – together.

So let us say it loud and clear:

We will not give ground.

We will not turn back.

We will push back against the pushback.

And we will keep pushing.

For wholesale change. For rapid change. And for the meaningful change our world needs, starting by addressing the imbalance in power relations.

That is why here at the UN, I have been pushing for gender parity. And I am proud to report to you, we are making good progress.

Today, if you look around the table of my Senior Management Group, you will find more women than men. Ms. Triggs is no longer alone.

A first in United Nations history.

Look around the world and you will find parity among our Resident Coordinators – our top officials on the ground.

Again, a first in United Nations history.

We have the most female heads and deputy heads of peace operations in UN history. And there is still a long way to go.

We are well on our way to parity in all senior ranks by 2021 – and across the board in the UN by 2028.

But that is not coming without pushback.

I am told that even within the system some critics have even dared to play the competency card.

I heard it all before when I pushed for greater empowerment in my own political party decades ago in my country.

The United Nations Charter states: “the paramount consideration in the employment of the staff ... shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity”.

The point is: men and women are equally efficient, equally competent, and with the same levels of integrity.

It is the present situation that penalizes women and the organization as a whole.

With these facts in hand, I have reached a very clear and scientific conclusion: what these critics are saying about competency is complete and utter nonsense.

Or, and I say to our critics, do you truly believe that men are on average more competent than women? If not, parity is a must for the Charter to be respected.

The way to take profit of all the competence that women bring is to achieve parity.

The General Assembly made it clear in a resolution all the way back in 1975, stating that “a major principle governing the recruitment policy of the United Nations” must be the “equitable distribution of the positions between men and women”. A very strong recommendation unfortunately almost completely forgotten for decades.

And let us be clear – parity is about far more than numbers.

We are striving for greater opportunity for so many outstanding, talented, qualified women for a far more fundamental reason. Dare I say, a more selfish reason.

Because it is good for us all.

When women are at the table, the chance of sustainable peace increases.

When women have equal opportunities in the labour force, economies can unlock trillions, as it was forecast recently.

When gender is at the heart of humanitarian assistance, vital assistance goes farther and has greater impact for everyone – men, women, girls and boys.

Parity is about our very effectiveness in securing peace, advancing human rights and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Put simply, when we exclude women, everyone pays the price.

When we include women, the whole world wins.

One of your main themes this year is sustainable infrastructure – a vital issue.

But you also are focusing on infrastructure in its largest sense: building better societies.

We know women must be engaged as equal participants in all aspects of society. That is how we build a better world.

This means changing power relations, closing gaps, tackling biases, fighting to preserve hard-won gains and winning ever-greater ground.

Above all it means believing – never, ever giving up.

I have hope.

You give me hope, by your commitment. Your energy. Your example. Your resilience.

I am with you.

I am a proud feminist.

You have my full support.

As we look to next year's 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action – the 20th anniversary of Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security – the 75th anniversary of the United Nations – to keep giving direction to our world.

Keep leading us to a place where women and men enjoy equal rights, equal freedoms and equal power.

We need you more than ever.

Thank you.