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On International Women's Day, let's think about the future we want and that society needs.

By Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive
Director of UN Women

The gains in gender equality made since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action have been under almost universal pressure, especially last year, whether in education, health, income generation, representation of women or safety and security, all exacerbated in the context of COVID-19. The world faces a looming debt crisis and

critical displacement of women from the labour market. We are seeing a threat of going back to the era when it was assumed 'a women's place is at home'. These regressions in gender equality threaten the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and need a dedicated, bold effort across the UN System – and beyond.

There are no magic solutions to these systemic, global problems of inequality. But there is one common factor that runs throughout – the absence of enough women in decision-making positions in all these fields. What happens if we change that? If we fill all those empty spaces where women’s voices are not yet heard, are not yet heeded. More inclusive decisions will be made, different voices heard, and different solutions created. Money will be allocated to the issues that most closely affect women’s lives, benefitting whole communities.

This is how we can build back green, equitable, gender-responsive and inclusive.

This is the vision of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, the vision of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It is the vision of young people who are already leading the way. It is the vision of the Generation Equality Action Coalitions. It is the vision of UN Women. And leadership is the theme of both International Women’s Day and the Commission on the Status of Women, where discussions will focus on how women and men can collectively solve the urgent challenges of our time through fast tracked, equal power-sharing in public life.

The world has seen exemplary COVID-19 responses led by women across the world, from Germany to New Zealand, from Iceland, to Barbados, including reacting early and decisively to close borders and impose strict isolation measures; prioritizing public health by testing widely and early enough to detect, isolate and treat patients effectively; providing clear, calm and fact-based information related to infection rates, country shutdowns and gradual reopening; and communicating honestly and transparently with citizens.

The lack of women in the public sector has left many governments desperately ill-equipped to respond to the multifaceted crisis. Giant gaps remain in women’s participation in decision-making. An analysis of COVID-19 task forces from 87 countries

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found that only 3.5 per cent of them had gender parity.

If current trends hold, it will take approximately 130 years to achieve gender parity in heads of government. 119 countries have never had a female leader and, currently, only 22 countries have a female head of state or government. The barriers persist at all levels of government, across the public sector and civil society. A mere 14 countries have achieved 50 per cent or more women in cabinets. Similarly, only [four countries](#) have elected a majority of women in parliament.

Transformative change to advance gender equality starts with political will. Other key aspects include funding for women in public life, gender-responsive institutions pushing for equal participation, and engaging men in recognizing that gender equality benefits them, too. The results are dramatic and impact not just women but whole families and communities. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a gender analysis of the federal budget led to a re-balancing in the COVID-19 context and enabled MPs to request specific resource allocations for women entrepreneurs and to avoid budget cuts to social support provisions for families.

The changes we are calling for will take money- and over ten trillion dollars has been poured into fiscal and monetary

packages. Yet only 15 per cent of the support measures introduced currently cover violence against women and girls, support unpaid care, and strengthen women's economic security in ways that will overall entrench gender responsiveness and equity.

This is why women's voices and representation are so vital, now more than ever, to steer policy and decision-making in ways that are going to make long-term change as well as bring short term relief.

UN Women's analysis points to gender quotas as an essential step for countries striving to improve representation in elected office. They have been shown to be a successful tool when they are well designed and effectively implemented, as for example in Tunisia, Mexico, Nepal or Rwanda. Of the 23 countries that have reached or surpassed 40 per cent of women in parliament, more than two-thirds have applied gender quotas.

However, we will not succeed without eliminating gender-based violence. Over the past year, countries around the world have reported spikes in calls to domestic violence hotlines as government lockdowns and social-distancing measures in some cases trapped women and girls with their abusers.

The experience by women in elected office of increased violence is a worldwide phenomenon, with women of colour experiencing violence at disproportionate levels. Women politicians, human rights defenders, leaders of women's organizations and feminist groups are more often targeted online and offline. For example, women parliamentarians recently reported experiencing nearly twice as much exposure to ill-treatment and acts of violence compared to men.

Cyber violence has also been on the rise since before the COVID-19 pandemic. One study showed that more than 80 per cent of women parliamentarians surveyed globally experienced on-the-job psychological violence, one in three experienced economic violence, and one in four experienced

physical violence, and one in five sexual violence.

UN Women's analysis and its recommendations – prepared for the Secretary General's [report](#) ahead of the Commission on the Status of Women (15-26 March) – will also inform discussions at the Generation Equality Forum that will take place in Mexico City and Paris this year. Co-hosted by UN Women and the governments of Mexico and France, these events aim to accelerate gender equality and enable the participation of all people, especially young women. Generation Equality will help us with fulfilling some of the promises that have not been fulfilled since they were made in 1995 when the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted. It will respond also to the needs that have now been created by the pandemic and accelerate the achievement of the SDGs in the Decade of Action.

At the Forums, we will call on all decision-makers to take measurable steps to increase the participation and leadership of women in all their diversity, including by applying quotas, appointing an equal number of women and men to all public positions, providing access to financing to support women's campaigns, and eliminating violence against women in public life.

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We are bringing in young people around the world with over 50 million people already involved in Generation Equality Forum preparations, consultations and events. This includes the activation of the Leaders for Generation Equality, an intergenerational network of over 200 women leaders from across the world.

We have seen how fast global prioritization and cooperation can work. Like vaccine development, countries must now fast-track actions to increase women’s participation in leadership and decision making. This is a moment to advocate for representation for all women, in all their diversity, including those women who are facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and young women, who must participate equally in decision-making at the highest levels.



Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka is United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women. She was sworn into office on 19 August 2013 and brings a wealth of experience and expertise to this position, having devoted her career to issues of human rights, equality and social justice. Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka has worked in government and civil society, and with the private sector, and was actively involved in the struggle to end apartheid in her home country of South Africa.

From 2005 to 2008, she served as Deputy President of South Africa, overseeing programmes to combat poverty and bring the advantages of a growing economy to the poor, with a particular focus on women. Prior to this, she served as Minister of Minerals and Energy from 1999 to 2005 and Deputy Minister in the Department of Trade and Industry from 1996 to 1999. She was a Member of Parliament from 1994 to 1996 as part of South Africa's first democratic government.

Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka began her career as a teacher and gained international experience as a coordinator at the World YWCA in Geneva, where she established a global programme for young women. She is the founder of the Umlambo Foundation, which supports leadership and education. A longtime champion of women's rights, she is affiliated with several organizations devoted to education, women's empowerment and gender equality.

She has completed her PhD on education and technology at the University of Warwick, United Kingdom.

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