

Still no country for women? Double standards in choosing the next UN Secretary-General

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Six of the twelve candidates for the job of UN Secretary-General are women, but in the first informal vote at the Security Council only one woman made it to the top five. Why ?



Peter Thomson receives congratulations on his election as the new U.N. General Assembly president, June, 2016.
Credit: AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews

On July 21st the UN Security Council conducted the first (but not the final by any means) informal poll to identify top candidates for the job of next UN Secretary-General. For the first time in history, fifty percent of the candidates - six of the twelve - are women. But a more familiar history repeated itself during the polling: the male candidates fared much better than the women. Only one woman figured amongst the top five. Four of the five at the bottom of the list are women. Old-style geopolitics may be responsible for the outcome: candidates from Eastern European countries that are in good odor with Russia did best. But the stern relegation of most of the women candidates to the bottom half of the list means we must ask if gender bias played a role. The secrecy of the process makes it hard to know, though it is obvious that the Council ignored civil society [petitions](#), [pressure from 60 Member States](#), and an [Open Letter](#) signed by fifty UN experts and former leaders calling for the selection of a woman and feminist to lead the UN.

Since 1981 the Council has used an informal 'straw poll' to winnow out candidates who do not have the support of the permanent 5 (P5) and who will therefore be vetoed. In this rare instance of Security Council members vote anonymously, members indicate which candidates they would 'encourage' or 'discourage'. They can also hedge and indicate 'no opinion'. As is Security Council tradition, no results were shared officially. However a quickly leaked [tally of the votes](#) sparked a flurry of analysis of this first Council sorting of the contenders.



Antonio Guterres, former Prime Minister of Portugal and head of UNHCR, UN. Photo: Ourania Yancopoulos.

The Portuguese former prime minister and former head of UNHCR, Antonio Guterres, came top apparently with 12 'encourage' votes, an impressive zero 'discourage' votes, and 3 'no opinion'. Guterres had garnered respect for his performance in the series of meetings held between candidates and General Assembly members in April and mid-July. But the size of his lead over some of the women candidates - who also performed well and who [topped an informal public poll](#) - is a surprise. At the bottom of the list with only 2 votes to 'encourage' votes and 11 to 'discourage', is Vesna Pusic, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Croatia. While she delighted observers with her candour in pointing out the UN's flaws, defending LGBTQ rights, and declaring herself a feminist (the only candidate to do so), she had not been expected to do well, in part because of her lack of UN experience, while a government change, days after her nomination, has deprived her of strong national backing.



Irina Bokova, head of UNESCO, UN. Photo: Ourania Yancopoulos.

Irina Bokova, currently the head of UNESCO, and the early front-runner in the process, landed in third place, with 9 'encourage' votes and 4 'discourage'. Four negatives are a lot in this process because with only 15 voters in the

Security Council, the chances that this includes one of the 5 veto-holders is high. Perhaps the biggest surprise was that Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand and current head of UNDP, did not figure among the top three. She landed in sixth place with 8 'encourage' votes and 5 'discourage' votes. Another seasoned UN insider and Foreign Minister of Argentina, Susanna Malcorra, came 8th. Christiana Figueres of Costa Rica, the successful head of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, [considered to have performed brilliantly](#) during the mid-July Al-Jazeera-moderated panels of candidates at the General Assembly, came 9th.

Among the top five are four candidates from Eastern Europe. Russia's friends in the region did well, with some of the lesser-known candidates, Serbian Vuk Jeremic and the Macedonian Srgjan Kerim, in the 4th and 5th place, each with 9 'encourages' and 5 'discourages'. Countries with disputes with Russia saw their candidates sink: Moldova's Natalia Gherman, which has a Russian-supported breakaway region, came 10th, while Montenegro's Igor Luksic came 11th - payback for his country's efforts to join NATO. The shock was the positioning of Jeremic and Kerim ahead of candidates with as much or more experience in national and international politics, and deeper UN experience, such as Clark, Malcorra and Figueres. It shows that geopolitical considerations trumped merit in the voting. While that is nothing new at the UN, it indicates that the arguments in favor of selecting women candidates made little impression.

The placement of Antonio Guterres and Danilo Turk in the top two slots illustrates the East-West tension in the Council. The success of Turk, former President of Slovenia, is no surprise. Turk represented his country to the UN, including a period on the Security Council, and also held a post as Assistant Secretary-General in the Department of Political Affairs. He is known as a consummate negotiator with friends everywhere in the male-dominated hierarchies inside the UN bureaucracy and across member states. This is what it means to be in the old boy's network.

Guterres' evidently robust support across the Council membership suggests that a contradictory dynamic **is** at work - that in spite of the Council's default preference for the custom of geographic preference, Guterres has something they want. What is it? His self-presentation during the last few months of public scrutiny at the UN was as a truth-teller, frankly laying bare the fact that the international humanitarian system is broke and [broken](#), and that contemporary conflicts have exposed the UN's peace-making tools as inadequate. He is articulate and empathetic. He is perceived as a candidate offering change.

It is important to scrutinize the 'candidate for change' label, and the contrasting perception of some of the female candidates: that they have campaigned as 'continuity' and 'establishment' candidates. What is the 'change' that Guterres proposes? His campaign appearances have been compelling and intelligent, but on the specifics of reform he seems mainly to endorse proposals made in the 2015 peace operations review, peacebuilding architecture review, and the UN's global study on women peace and security.

In this lack of specificity Guterres is not different from the other lead candidates. Most of the candidates offer observations about how the UN needs to adapt to the times. Guterres, as well as Bokova and Clark, emphasize that they have streamlined and cut staff numbers in the UN entities that they manage. This is clearly intended to appeal the biggest financial contributors to the UN. Beyond underlying their efficiency as managers, they have been cagey on what else they plan to do.

Guterres, who has just concluded a decade as the High Commissioner on Refugees, was Prime Minister of Portugal, and President of the European Council. It is striking that these 'establishment' qualifications, and his many years as a UN 'insider' has been treated as a virtue, not a potential constraint, as it has been for Helen Clark. In the April hearings at the General Assembly, one Member State suggested to Clark that, as the Administrator of the UNDP, her leadership might not bring anything new. Her [response](#) cut straight to the point:

"I have never been an establishment contender for anything. I have come from the outside to everything I have done. From rural upbringing to urban life, as a woman breaking into a man's world, as PM, as the first woman to be administrator of UNDP. I come from out of the box and I will always be a bit out of the box."

Guterres's critiques of the UN's shortcomings likewise have not generated the hostility triggered by critical observations made by, for instance, Vesna Pusic. Saudi Arabia chose to interpret her accurate observation of the UN as a 'flawed' organization to accuse her of having an '[adversarial attitude](#)'. Hints of vision, charisma, and courage from the women candidates have not been appreciated. During the April debates, Saudi Arabia sarcastically asked Clark if she planned to act as '[the conscience of the world](#)'. While that might be what most people want, there are no prizes for knowing the answer that the Saudis (and the Security Council) want to hear.

Guterres, however, has projected change, conscience, and charisma without triggering taunts from Member States. His gender is not immaterial to his success in doing this. Coming from an elder statesman, his critiques of the UN and expressions of principle are interpreted as reassuring, straight-talking, and visionary. From stateswomen, critiques come across as stern or hectoring – or 'adversarial'. If the women candidates have been perceived as campaigning as continuity candidates, this ignores their reform messages and fails to acknowledge the harsh judgement some of them have received for offering frank critiques.

Richard Gowan, a seasoned observer of UN politics, [recently argued](#) that power, not gender, governed the outcomes of the July 21 straw poll, and the analysis above supports this. However, gender may play an outsize role in shaping the way candidate rhetoric is interpreted - rhetoric which is often similar in content - as vision and courage when it comes from men but dull 'continuity' from women. Double standards are not just affecting this race – statements by Hillary Clinton that would be anodyne coming from a man are routinely given the most [uncharitable interpretation](#) possible.



UN General Assembly debate, New York. Photo: UN.

Gender bias is profound at the UN, where perspectives on women's leadership are sometimes stuck in the same era as the mid-century architecture at its HQ in New York. The UN has made commitments to promote gender equality in its own staff and its work, but these resolutions are implemented so poorly that they reek of raw cynicism. The UN has no quota system to help meet its gender parity hiring commitments. Staff who want promotions in the Secretariat have to work in difficult duty stations – including conflict-affected locations to which families are not permitted. This experience-building requirement in effect discriminates against women with families. It has weeded out female mid-managers to the point of freezing the proportion of women in the senior management pipeline to around 20%. This has contributed to a worsening gender ratio at the top of UN entities; last year, either a bias against or a lack of women candidates meant that [84% of new appointments to Under- and Assistant-Secretary-General positions were male](#).



United Nations General Assembly, New York. Photo: UN

The maddening thing about the SG selection process is that the lack of clear rules makes it hard to know what comes next. In any other contest, the July 21 result would mean that the whole thing is over. But it is far from over. It could be just the beginning of the horse-trading and the bargaining for key posts (a crucial piece of UN reform that no candidate has ventured to articulate is to bar P5 countries from providing candidates to head UN entities). The fact that Russia clearly did not cast a 'discourage' vote for Guterres is a sign that it is willing to negotiate. And there are potential new candidates in the wings – former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has already asked the Australian government to nominate him, Mexico might come forward with Kofi Annan's former Chef de Cabinet Alicia Barcena, and some die-hard optimists still hold out hope that an Eastern European country other than Bulgaria will nominate European Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva.

While growing the pool of strong women candidates to be the next UN Secretary-General is a good idea, there is now less than ever a sense that they - or anyone - will get the job on their merits. Gone too, after last week's poll, is the sense that any member of the Council was ever sincerely interested in a woman in the top position. According to [PassBlue](#), even before the Council met, the British Permanent Representative, Matthew Rycroft, hedged on the UK's earlier endorsement of the idea that the next Secretary-General should be a woman, [telling the press that the UK would not use its veto to make sure that happened](#).

Vetoes and quotas are what works in other political contests to ensure that women get a fair shot. This is called affirmative action. It is ironic that the UN, which has no hesitations about reserving positions for individuals of particular nationalities, should shy away from doing so on the grounds of gender. If regional rotation of the top post is considered an informal 'tradition', then surely a gender-based alternation could be constructed as a new one? But at no point was there a serious discussion of an all-female shortlist for the SG position. An enduring critic of Ban's administration, Stephen Lewis, has been the only observer to declare that if we seriously want a woman SG, all the male candidates should be considered '[disqualified](#)'.

Security Council members may vote more vindictively in the next straw poll, giving an even stronger sense of likely vetoes, and shaking off the stronger candidates.

Everyone, except perhaps for those who can vote in this process, want someone honest, brave, principled, effective, and committed to gender equality and justice.

No-one wants a lowest-common denominator winner.

And to answer the question constantly posed to campaigners for the selection of a woman, no, we don't want a

woman in the job just because she is a woman, just for the sake of ending the 70-plus years of sole male occupancy. Most of those who support the selection of a woman want a feminist for the job.

A measure of the impact of the campaigns for a woman UNSG is that all of the male candidates have declared themselves gender equality champions, dutifully appending commitments to gender mainstreaming to their proposals. Late comers to feminism are always welcome, of course, and whoever wins will be held to their promises to reach gender parity in staffing and improve the UN's work on women's rights.

Many people worldwide want to see serious changes in the UN. It would be the opposite of 'continuity' to have a feminist woman Secretary-General, promoting gender equality at the UN and in international politics. It would send the strongest possible signal of a break with the dysfunctional traditions of the UN.

There are feminist women candidates who are able and willing to do this job. Security Council members are able to make this happen and to signal that the UN belongs in the 21st century. But on the evidence of last week's poll, they are not willing.



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