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Why the Next United Nations Secretary General Should be a Woman



An interview with Susana Malcorra and Jody Williams.

Augusto Lopez-Claros: Thank you Susana and Jody for agreeing to participate in this interview. Sometime in the next several years, upon the retirement of Antonio Guterres, the current UN Secretary General, the UN will be searching for a new leader, the tenth SG since Trygve Lie, the Norwegian diplomat, assumed office in early 1946. As you know, all nine SGs in the UN's 78-year history have been men—four Europeans, two Asians, two Africans and one Latin American.

In 2016, leading to the ultimate appointment of Mr. Guterres there were a number of serious female contenders for the post, including you Susana, together with Helen Clark, the former New Zealand Prime Minister and Irina Bokova, the Director General of UNESCO. We at the Global Governance Forum are of the view that the time has come to break with tradition and select a woman during the next round and the purpose of this interview is to make the case of why this goes well beyond pure symbolism and is in fact of vital importance for the future of the UN. Jody, let me start with you. All three of us recently participated in a panel discussion at one of Spain's leading universities ([Rethinking Global Affairs to Confront Global Challenges](#)). We discussed some of the critical issues facing the world today and how these would challenge the next UN Secretary General in the coming years, after the retirement of Antonio Guterres. What would you consider to be some of the main problems immediately ahead?

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From left to right: Moderator Augusto Lopez-Claros, Jody Williams, Susana Malcorra and Maria Fernanda Espinosa in a panel discussion on ‘Rethinking Global Affairs to Confront Global Challenges’ at the IE University in Madrid on January 19, 2023.

Jody Williams: Before moving on to other significant issues confronting us all, one of the major concerns is exemplified by the question itself. Finally appointing a woman secretary general of the UN would be another step in shattering the myth that men are made to run the world, not women. Shattering such myths can sometimes seem like a Sisyphean task but we can and must work more and harder to end gender discrimination.

Three other major concerns would include accelerating climate change; the unraveling of our nuclear order as the relentless drive continues to marry artificial intelligence with weapons systems that on their own can make, target and kill decisions unimpeded by human involvement; and finally is the dramatically widening gap between the rich and the poor in the world, with its impact on women in particular.

The 20 March release of the most recent UN report on climate change leaves no doubt that we are at a climate tipping point and the dire consequences of climate change. If no serious, concerted action takes place now humans will destroy our physical environment which will destabilize our economies and undermine our political and social order. The consequences of the one on the other are evident. So, climate change is a social, economic and political crisis that must be faced.

When it comes to the global nuclear order, in its 2022 nuclear year in review *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* declared it to be “in shambles.” There were no meaningful results in efforts at nuclear disarmament or nonproliferation, and days before the first anniversary of his February 24, 2022, invasion of Ukraine, Putin announced that Russia was suspending its participation in the New START nuclear arms control treaty. With this announcement, he effectively put the last nail in the coffin of the entire arms control architecture, according to NATO’S secretary general Jens Stoltenberg.

At a time when we thought our blood-soaked 20th century was behind us, contrary to the spirit and the letter of the treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the major nuclear powers are expanding and modernizing their arsenals (at an annual cost of over \$82 billion just in 2021). To my mind, the climate crisis and global nuclear disorder are the two most egregious existential threats facing humanity and the entire planet.

Finally, we need to face the galloping increase in income inequality in the world, which was already at sky-high levels before the pandemic and has since spiraled out of control. In 2020, for the first time in 30 years we saw a reversal of the progress made in reducing extreme poverty worldwide and this has had a direct impact on the most vulnerable and discriminated members of society, namely women and children. In countries like Iran, to take one of many possible examples, women have been turned into second class citizens by

those wielding power in the country and through multiple forms of discrimination embedded in its laws which maintain that disparity.

This issue has clear links to the question of income distribution but is also a fourth challenge in its own right, for the vulnerability of young women in particular at the hands of those who are willing to wreak violence on them in an attempt to maintain power has become a universal challenge.

Lopez-Claros: Susana, would you mind taking this last point and expanding on it further? How important an issue is gender equality, in your opinion, in relation to the other challenges mentioned by Jody? Is it as urgent as climate change, for example? Or as immediately dangerous as the proliferation of nuclear arms? Why is it any more egregious than other violations against human rights?

Susana Malcorra: Over the past several decades we have seen an evolution in our thinking about gender equality. In the early postwar period, our focus was very much based on the notion that gender discrimination was a violation of human and civil rights. We understood it to be in direct contradiction to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 and the UN Charter, a document endorsed by its 193 member countries.

However, over the following years, we realized that there was an important economic and social dimension to gender discrimination. Productivity—and hence economic growth—would be harmed by not giving women and girls equal opportunities for education and advancement. The fact that 50% of the population was not fully empowered, in economics terms, affected GDP and GDP growth throughout the world. It was necessary to remove barriers to her participation in the labor market and vast empirical evidence emerged, showing the beneficial effects for economic prosperity as a result of providing women with opportunities to contribute to the economy.

Parallel to and building upon this growing awareness and perhaps partly because we began to understand what benefits it brought society to enhance opportunities for women, we began to realize that women had been largely absent from political decision making; they had been excluded from the so-called corridors of power, a phenomenon which also extended to the board rooms of publicly listed companies, even in countries (e.g., the Nordics) which had been on the forefront of efforts to narrow the gender gap across a range of dimensions.

In more recent years, we have made some progress in terms of facilitating the political participation of women but even so, much still needs to be done. As of 2021 only 21% of all ministerial posts are filled by women, 25% of seats in parliaments are held by women and, more depressingly, only 12% of all prime ministers and heads of state positions are in the hands of women, although this figure is likely lower now because of the recent departure of Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand and Magdalena Andersson in Sweden.



Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern

Lopez-Claros: While all this is true, it is also slow. Your historical approach illustrates the role that time plays in this process. But meanwhile, burning issues face us, of nuclear proliferation, for example, and its impact on the environment, and these have imminent deadlines and demand urgent action. How can gender equality, Jody, impact peace and security in the world?

Williams: The growing body of data we now have clearly demonstrate the costs we pay in war and peace for the marginalization of women from the decision-making process. The UN Security Council in its Resolution 1325 of 2000 called for “an increase in the participation of women at decision-making levels in conflict resolution and peace processes,” and recognized that the “full participation of women in the peace process can significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security.” So, this issue remains at the heart of the United Nations mandate and here are a few examples of why:

1. The vast majority of the 20 countries with the worst scores in the Global Governance Forum’s Gender Equality and Governance Index have experienced major conflict during the past two decades;
2. Countries with greater participation of women in parliament have fewer violations of human rights, lower incidence of tortures, killings and “desaparecidos”—Iran has one of the lowest participation of women in Parliament in the world;
3. A study of 40 peace negotiations in 35 countries over a span of some 20 years showed that those processes in which women had a seat at the table led to agreements, whereas those in which they did not generally ended in failure. Moreover, those agreements in which women participated had a much higher probability of surviving for more than 15 years than those where women did not take part;
4. Overwhelming evidence that organizations where women are present in the top leadership—the executive board—are less prone to corruption and less likely to erupt in scandals and other failures of

governance, which have at times led to financial crises and their consequences, which often have a security dimension.

Lopez-Claros: All this flies in the face of our common prejudices about women the world over, doesn't it? – that they are the “weaker vessel” and the more vulnerable sex; that they are prone to hysteria and cannot cope with danger. In fact you are saying the exact opposite is true! Susana, why do you think women might be particularly adapted to crisis management?

Malcorra: Well, let's take the pandemic. That was a crisis, right, on a global scale. Women tend to handle problems in a more holistic way, hence finding multifaceted solutions to complex challenges. I cannot show you how women dealt with it at that level but there are some interesting statistics pertaining to COVID management at a national level during the period 2020-21. Some researchers made a list of the countries where the pandemic was managed effectively, where there was due regard for the opinion of experts, where the government kept the population well informed and acted in otherwise sensitive and responsible ways. And surprise, surprise, as it turns out, 40% of these countries were run by women – New Zealand, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Singapore, Taiwan. So even though women only run 12% of all countries, this example can give you an idea of how effectively they might run the world if given half the chance.

Lopez-Claros: Well, this brings me to the obvious question. Why do you think the next Secretary General should and could be a woman? Let me give you both the opportunity to answer.

Malcorra: There are several arguments that come to mind:

1. First of all, the United Nations represents the peoples. The fact that, since its foundation in 1945, not a single woman has been at its helm,

is another dimension of how poorly represented the peoples are. I preside over an organization called GWL Voices that has prepared a Report that shows that, since its inception, women have led the 33 institutions under review only 12% of the time and 13 of them (the United Nations included) never had a woman leader. To me, in this 21st Century, this is totally unacceptable.

2. Secondly, it would make explicit the recognition by the Security Council that women indeed play a vitally important role in the achievement and maintenance of peace and security at a time of increasing global tensions and enhanced dangers and where, in the future, the UN will be called upon to take a more visible role.
3. Thirdly, as I said during our panel discussion in Madrid in January, we are coming out of a long period where the world has been run mostly by men who have not done very well, to put it mildly, judging by the calamities around us. So, it can hardly get any worse. Women bring a different perspective and have a “problem solving” approach to the challenges at hand. Let women take charge and see if they can do a better job. I am certain that they will.

Williams: I agree with all of Susana’s valid and compelling points. To these I would add:

4. When we look at large private sector organizations and the impact of the presence of women at the highest levels of decision making, studies show that these tend to be better managed, more profitable, have lower staff turnover and are more effective at whatever they do, whether it is producing goods and services, or, in the case of an IMF study, supervising the banking and financial system, when more women are involved in their running.
5. Finally, this is not an issue of signaling and symbols only, although those are important. The past 9 leaders of the UN, sometimes despite good efforts, have not succeeded in their efforts at reform and modernization. The UN Charter has never been amended, even

though its Article 109 opens the door to do precisely that. So why not give the chance to a qualified woman candidate to bring the UN into the 21st century at last? It needs to become a problem solving organization, rather than one that risks losing relevance at a time when it is most critical for it to intervene in global affairs and manage the critical crises facing us today.

Lopez-Claros: Thank you both for sharing these fascinating insights. You make a compelling case. Let us hope that the world will listen.

WRITTEN BY SUSANA MALCORRA, JODY WILLIAMS AND AUGUSTO LOPEZ-CLAROS