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The UN at 75: Where are the Women in the United Nations Now?

Kirsten Haack, Margaret P. Karns, and Jean-Pierre Murray

Women's access, representation, and leadership in the UN have been closely intertwined with issues of women's advancement globally. As the UN Intellectual History Project has shown, the UN has been at the forefront of conceptualizing women's roles in politics, development, and society more generally, not only through declarations and conventions intended to shape member states' behavior, but also through how it has shaped and implemented its own programs of assistance.¹ Nonetheless, for much of the UN's 75 years, it could be aptly characterized as "the world's largest men's club"² and only in more recent years has there been a significant change in the number of women serving as member states' permanent representatives and in leadership positions.

The UN Charter (Articles 8 and 101) stipulates that there shall be no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate in every capacity and under conditions of equality in its principal and subsidiary organs. Not surprisingly, however, aside from the clerical and translator staffs, there have been far fewer women than men employed within the UN system and particularly at its professional and decision-making staff levels, let alone among member states' permanent representatives, until recently. It has taken extensive efforts over more than 40 years to change that picture and efforts to achieve parity continue to fall short and gender biases persist within the UN system--biases that relate also to women's long exclusion from diplomacy more generally, particularly if they were married.³

UN Goal-setting on Gender Equality

One of the challenges facing gender equality advocates was the absence of gender-related data on UN personnel. In 1949, in response to a request from the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), Secretary-General Lie provided basic data on women in the Secretariat and in member state delegations as well as staff rules on conditions of employment of women. The report noted that of the 3,916 Secretariat staff as of November 30, 1949, 1,737 or 44 percent were women and the majority were concentrated in the lower-level positions.⁴ It was not until 1970 that a CSW-drafted resolution on the *Employment of qualified women in senior and other professional positions by the secretariats of organizations in the United Nations system* called for the UNSG to include information on women in his annual report. Beginning with the 1972 annual personnel report, there was both empirical evidence on the apparent exclusion of women and roadmaps towards improving the status of women within the organization, including a General Assembly-mandated goal of gender parity.⁵ In the

¹ For information on The United Nations Intellectual History Project, its publications, and oral history transcripts, see <http://www.unhistory.org/>

² Kirshenbaum, Gayle. (1992) "UN Expose: inside the world's largest men's club", *MS Magazine*, September/October, 16-19.

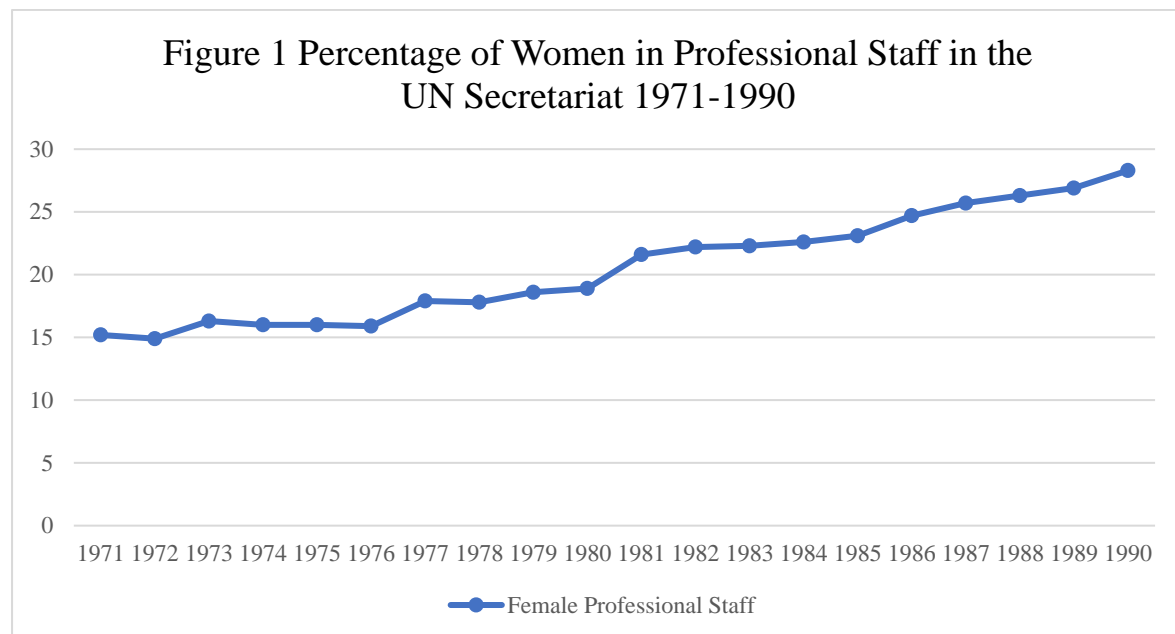
³ On the subject of women's exclusion, see Helen McCarthy, *Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

⁴ UN ECOSOC, Participation of Women in the Work of the United Nations: Report of the Secretary-General. E/CN.6/132 (16 March 1950).

⁵ UN General Assembly Employment of qualified women in senior and other professional positions by the secretariats of organizations in United Nations system, A/RES/2715, 15 December 1970. See for example: UN

following years, the successive women’s conferences and the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) provided further impetus to advance women’s status by calling for the UN system “to take all necessary measures to achieve an equitable balance between women and men staff members at managerial and professional levels in all substantive areas, as well as in field posts.”⁶

In December 1978, General Assembly Resolution 33/143 adopted a 25 percent target within the “next four years” subject to geographic distribution considerations, reflecting the tension between the new goal of gender equality and developing countries’ call for equal representation among UN staff. The first data on women in the professional staff had showed that women represented only 15 percent of the total and the 20 percent barrier was only broken in 1981. Following the third women’s conference in Nairobi, the General Assembly in 1986 adopted in Resolution 45/239 a target of 30 percent by 1990. Figure 1 shows the evolution of the status of women among the UN Secretariat’s professional staff from the early 1970s up to the passage of this resolution.



Data Source: Annual Reports of the Secretary-General on staffing at the Secretariat

Since 1990, more comprehensive data have been published in the annual UN System Human Resources Statistics Reports by the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) and provide a clearer picture of the position of women across the UN system. The reports break down staff into two broad categories: Professional and General Service. Professional staff covers a range of levels including Directors, Executive Heads, Assistant Secretaries-General and Under-Secretary-General. General Service represents non-professional staff and includes field service staff, security service, and manual workers.

ECOSOC, Employment of women by the Secretariats of organizations within the United Nations System : E/RES/1857(LVI) (16 May 1974); UN General Assembly, Employment of women in the Secretariat. A/RES/3416 (8 December 1975).

⁶ Final Report Third World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women, 1985, Section 5, paragraph 356.

Still, progress was slow and women faced hurdles as a result of member states' lack of engagement. It was the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing that gave impetus to the push for women's equal access to power structures and decision-making within the UN system. Section G of its Platform for Action called for gender balance in the lists of national candidates nominated for election or appointment to UN bodies and for new employment policies and measures to achieve gender equality, particularly at the professional level and above by 2000; for the development of mechanisms to nominate women candidates for appointment to senior posts across the system; and for the continued collection, dissemination, and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data on women and men in decision-making and of their differential impact on decision-making" as well as for monitoring progress toward the UNSG's target of having women in 50 percent of the managerial and decision-making positions by 2000.⁷ In 1999, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 54/139, setting the goal of achieving 50/50 gender distribution in all categories across the UN system and called for regular reports on the improvement of the status of women.

The Role of Secretaries-General

The secretaries-general were relatively slow to promote women into higher level positions, with Waldheim appointing Helvi Sipilä of Finland in 1972 as the first woman Assistant Secretary-General. Pérez de Cuéllar issued the first action program for the improvement of the status of women in the Secretariat, encompassing recruitment, career development, training, work/family-related issues, and an improved grievance redress system. He also made two senior appointments of women in 1987 – Nafis Sadik as Executive Director of the UN Fund for Population Activities and Margaret Anstee as Director-General of the UN Office at Vienna. Pérez de Cuéllar took the added step of establishing a Focal Point for Women to monitor and report on the status of women within the UN and assist in achieving gender balance. Kofi Annan created the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women (OSAGI) in 1997 and scored high marks in 1998 with his appointment of Louise Fréchette, Canada's deputy Defense Minister and former ambassador to the UN, to the newly created post of Deputy Secretary-General. Fréchette's appointment increased the percentage of women in senior posts from 9.7 to 16.7.⁸ Annan's 2006 reform program provided the platform for the creation of UN Women by his successor.⁹

UNSG Ban Ki-moon is credited with several important steps and appointments, including the establishment of UN Women in 2010 through the merger of four tiny, competing gender units;¹⁰ the appointment of Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile, as its Executive

⁷ The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Platform for Action, Section G. Women in Power and Decision-making, paragraphs 190 and 193.

⁸ The others included two women USGs—Mary Robinson as UNHCHR and Elizabeth Dowdeswell, executive director of UNEP—and three ASGs—Angela King, Special Adviser on Gender Issues, Rafiah Salim, head of Human Resources Management, and Gillian Sorensen, head of External Relations.

⁹ See The High-Level panel's report, *Delivering as One*. Doc. A/61/583, 9 November 2006.

¹⁰ These were DAWN, INSTRAW, OSAGI, and UNIFEM. For details on the debates over UN Women's establishment see Hilary Charlesworth and Christine Chinkin, "The Creation of UN Women," RegNet Paper Series 2013/7. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2289567.

Director with the rank of USG; and launching two global campaigns relating to women. Ban also appointed the first woman commander of a UN peacekeeping force along with a female special representative, thus creating the first all-female leadership team in Cyprus. Still, while Ban had increased the number of women in senior positions by 40 percent by 2014,¹¹ the percentage of women in the professional categories had improved by only 8 points to a total of 43 percent. Moreover, despite significant progress earlier in his tenure, 92 percent of Ban Ki-moon's senior appointments in 2015 went to men.¹²

While the outcome of the major campaign in 2016 to name a woman as the ninth UN Secretary-General was disappointing, the idea of a woman UNSG gained considerable support from member states and the media.¹³ The new UNSG António Guterres noted the importance of gender equality in his opening speech, calling it both “an urgent need and a personal priority... a moral duty and an operational necessity.”¹⁴ Appointing an all-female team of top advisers in 2017, the UN hit a milestone in early 2018 in achieving full gender parity in its senior leadership—23 out of 44 posts that make up the UNSG's Senior Management Group or cabinet. Making approximately 150 appointments, Guterres appointed an equal or greater number of women than men, thus slowly reducing the gender gap, including the appointment of women to “hard” (typically male) issue area posts, such as the post of Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs.¹⁵ Still, the Campaign for a Feminist United Nations noted more substantive support for gender equality was required.¹⁶ Indeed, structural changes were meeting “considerable resistance” from staff and member states that resist women's rights.¹⁷

How far has the UN come?

Previous studies on the status of women in the UN have focused largely on data for women in the Secretariat itself and on the percentage of women in the Professional category because of their under-representation relative to the overall percentage of women in the organization which has averaged 44 percent over the years and includes the large number of women in the

¹¹ Ligiero, Daniela. (2016) “UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Commitment to Gender Equality.” Blog Post available at: <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/photos-un-secretary-general-ban-ki-moons-commitment-to-gender-equality/>.

¹² Landgren, Karin. (2015) “The Lost Agenda: Gender Parity in Senior UN Appointments.” *Global Peace Operations Review*, Available at: <http://peaceoperationsreview.org/commentary/the-lost-agenda-gender-parity-in-senior-un-appointments/>.

¹³ Haack, Kirsten. (2018) “The UN Secretary-General, role expansion and narratives of representation in the 2016 campaign.” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 20:4: 898-8912.

¹⁴ Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, “Making progress toward achieving gender parity.” Available at <https://un.org/gender/>.

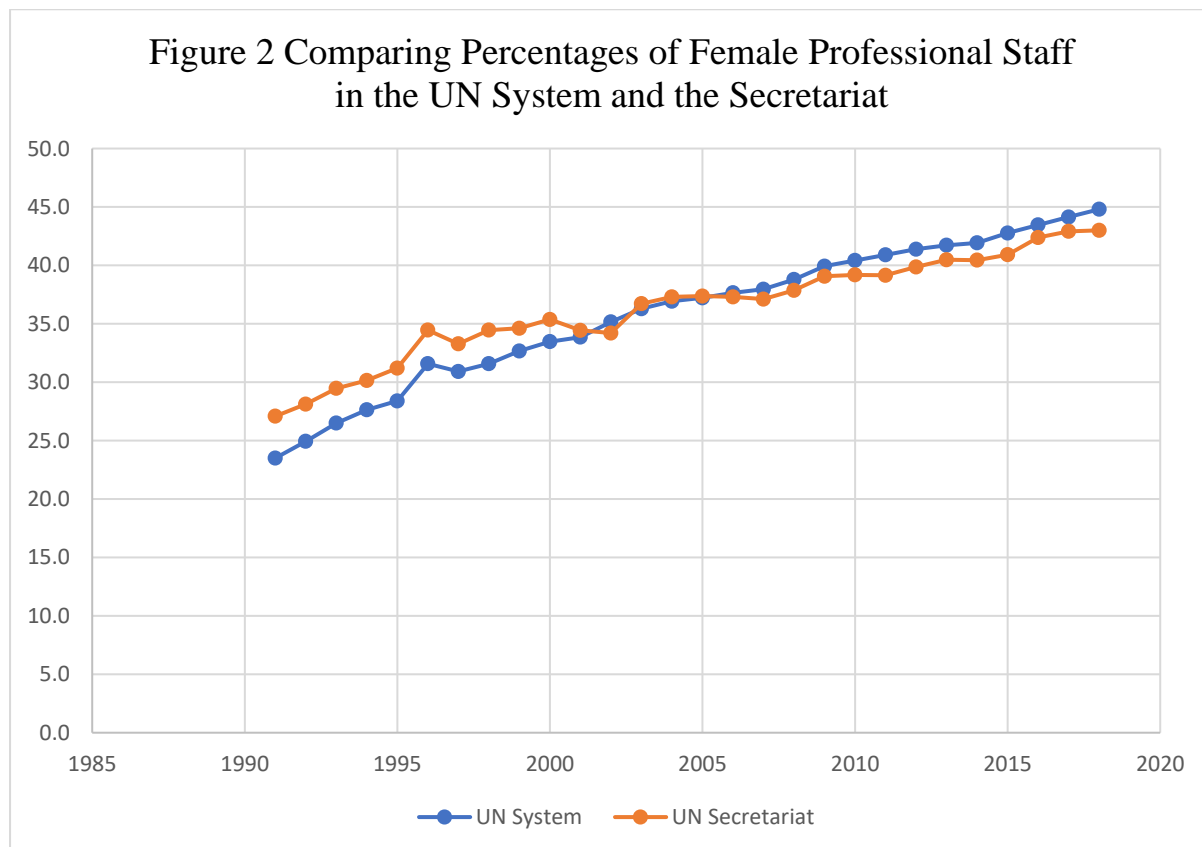
¹⁵ Rosemary DeCarlo of the United States was the appointee. It is worth noting that peace operations, i.e. peacekeeping in particular, were separated from the Department of Political Affairs and a man (Jean-Pierre Renaud Lacroix) was named USG for Peace Operations.

¹⁶ International Centre for Research on Women (2019) Progress under Threat. A Report Card on the Secretary-General's Second Year from the Feminist U.N. Campaign. Washington, D.C. <https://www.icrw.org/publications/feminist-un-report-card-2/>.

¹⁷ Wulforst, Ellen. (2019) “Fight for Gender Equality at U.N. faces tough internal resistance, report says.” (January 23) Thompson Reuters Foundation. Available at: <http://news.trust.org/item/20190123224801-84kzg/>; Thompson Lyric, Teresa Casale, Lila O'Brien-Milne. (2019) “Baby Steps toward a Feminist United Nations.” *Foreign Policy* (January 29). Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/29/united-nations-guterres-feminist-campaign/>.

General Services.¹⁸ Only in 2010 did the percentage of female Professional staff break the 40 percent barrier. Using this category as a proxy for women’s status and influence in decision-making, from 1991 when 23.5 percent of Professional staff were women, the percentage of female Professional staff in the UN system came close to doubling between 1992 and 2018.

The size of the UN Secretariat (33 percent of total Professional staff) has significant influence on system-wide data and Figure 2 demonstrates that the two have followed a similar path. Most specialized agency, program, and fund secretariats are well under 2,000 staff.¹⁹ Therefore, changes in either direction at the Secretariat can greatly influence the overall system data on level of female inclusion.



Data Source: CEB Annual UN HR Statistics Reports

Disparities Across the UN System

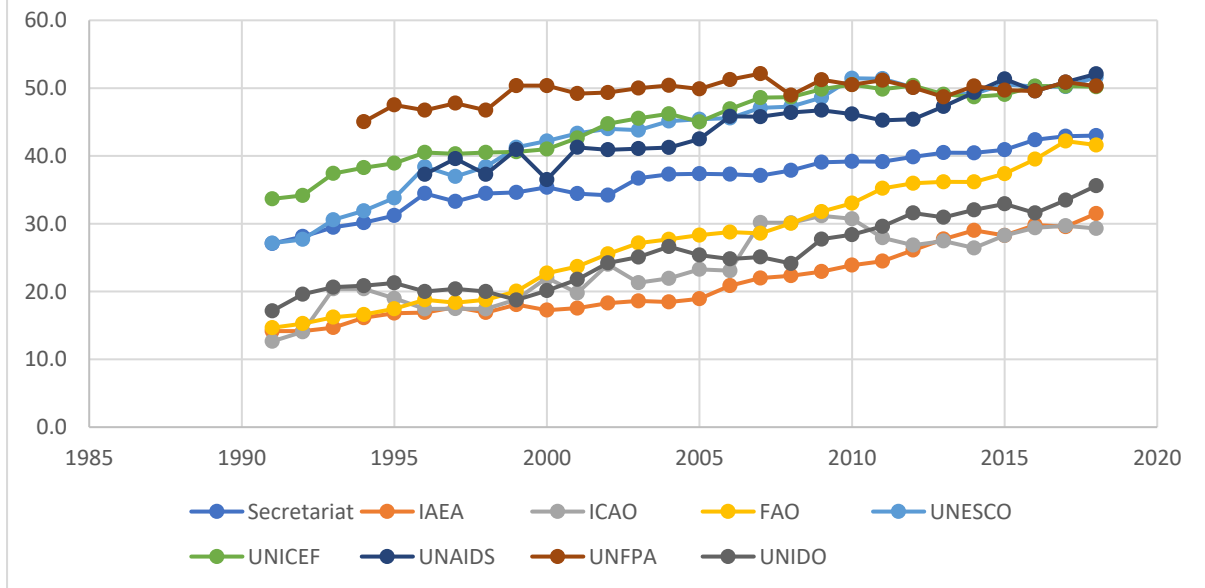
Not surprisingly, however, the numbers of women Professional staff vary significantly across UN agencies, funds, and programs. Data show that gendered assumptions about different roles or specific issue areas are still influencing recruitment as evidenced in the variations that Figure 3 shows among eight of these entities. Four of them had achieved parity as of 2018—UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNICEF, and UNFPA.²⁰

¹⁸ See for example, Haack, Kirsten. (2014) “Breaking barriers?’ Women’s representation and leadership at the United Nations.” *Global Governance*, 20:1 (Jan.-Mar.): 37-54.

¹⁹ It is important to note that the World Bank and International Monetary Fund are not included in the CEB UN system staff reports.

²⁰ Using the criterion of at least 100 professional staff, a total of 19 entities were included in our study: the UN Secretariat, FAO, IAEA, ICAO, IFAD, ILO, IMO, ITU, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIDO, WFP, WHO, and WIPO. Data for the full set are available upon request.

Figure 3 Percentages of Female Professional Staff in Select Entities across the UN System



Data Source: CEB Annual UN HR Statistics Reports

All of these entities deal with issues generally considered gender specific, highlighting the phenomenon of “glass walls” that often steer women into “softer” gender-specific portfolios while men dominate leadership roles in portfolios considered more “masculine.”²¹ The “glass walls” are most apparent in the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) whose portfolios are traditionally considered male-dominated fields. Although all eight agencies show some improvement in the representation of women professional staff, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) shows the most. Some might argue, for example, that this pattern reflects the comparatively low representation of women generally in science, technology, and engineering, the barriers women often face, and the fact that staff in these organizations are drawn from national agencies which by and large have few women. Still, this alone does not explain the relatively poor performance of these entities, however, after decades of UN policy directives to improve the representation of women system-wide.

The Status of Women in Leadership Positions

Women are still underrepresented in leadership positions across the UN system although Guterres earned in 2017 high praise for his appointments of three women to his top staff. Still, in early 2020, there were just nine women among the thirty-one members of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) which includes heads of twelve funds and programs, fifteen specialized agencies, and three related organizations.²² Among the

²¹ See Haack (2014) “Breaking Barriers?”

²² The funds and programs include UNDP, UNCTAD, UNEP, UNHCR, UNRWA, WFP, UNODC, UN-Habitat, UN Women, and UNOPS. The specialized agencies include the ILO, FAO, UNESCO, WHO, World Bank group, IMF, UPU, ITU, WMO, WIPO, IFAD, UNIDO, IOM, and WTO (World Tourism Organization). The 3 related organizations are the World Trade Organization, UNOPS, and IAEA.

specialized agencies, women currently head only three: UNESCO, ICAO, and IMF—two of which, however, are “hard” issue areas. The 45-member Senior Management Group chaired by the UNSG, however, painted a picture of inclusiveness for women in leadership with 30 women (67 percent) as of February 2020.²³ Women are executive secretaries of all five regional economic commissions (Europe, Western Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia-Pacific). And, women hold five of the six Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and Special Adviser positions included in the Senior Management Group—notably posts covering violence against children, children and armed conflict, sexual violence in conflict, disaster risk reduction, and Africa. Not surprisingly, in the past men have held the trade, development, economic and social affairs posts as well as counter-terrorism, but a woman is now executive director of the UN Office of Drugs and Crime as of November 2019. Since Guterres increased the total number of SRSG roles with more women serving as SRSGs in recent years, this has enlarged the pool of women in the UN system and women in leadership in particular.

Conclusion

The question we ask in the title of this essay – where are the women in the UN now? – has much wider significance than merely accounting for the most recent hirings by Secretary-General Guterres. The lack of gender parity between men and women in the UN itself could not be fully addressed before data revealed women’s absence, be that in professional staff or leadership roles.

From one perspective, the UN has shown marked improvement in the representation of women among the Professional staff although there are still notable disparities across the specialized agencies, funds, and programs. Gendered perceptions of organizational mandates and portfolios continue to be key factors in achieving the goal of parity especially at the levels of senior leadership. In short, “glass walls” continue to plague the gender equality agenda in the UN system while parts of the glass ceiling have certainly been shattered or shown flexibility.

Increasing the proportion of female Professional staff within each UN entity eventually increases the potential for more women to be promoted to higher ranks. Yet, there is further work to be done on obstacles and barriers women face; on the deeply embedded gender biases;²⁴ and on emerging evidence of sexual harassment and even assault experienced by women in the UN system.²⁵

As Haack notes in her earlier study of women’s representation and leadership at the UN, efforts that began with the Women’s Year and first World Conference in 1975 were a product of a “triangular alliance” of women in the UN Secretariat, women, diplomats, and women’s social movements outside the UN.²⁶ The story of those groups and movement has to some

²³ UN Senior Management Group. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/senior-management-group> .

²⁴ Bode, Ingvild (2019) “Women or Leaders? Practices of Narrating the United Nations as a Gendered Institution.” *International Studies Review* [Advance Articles]. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viz004>.

²⁵ Jina Moore. (2018) “U.N. Cases Read Like ‘Manual in How Not to Investigate’ Sexual Assault,” *New York Times* (June 29).

²⁶ Haack 2014: 42. Other earlier studies of women in the UN include Francine D’Amico, “Women Workers in the United Nations: From Margin to Mainstream?” in *Gender Politics in Global Governance* edited by Mary K.

extent already been told, but much more remains to be done to provide a fuller understanding of the roles of various actors, including the women's movement and UN staff.²⁷ Successive UNSGs have contributed to the process of increasing the presence of women, but like any leader they can be hamstrung by their own bureaucracy. Hence, the path toward gender equality in UN staffing has been uneven and slow. Promotion within the UN has often depended more on nationality than ability and gender only gradually has come to be a consideration. Yet, Ban Ki-moon and Guterres have placed more women in key leadership posts, heightening the visibility of women in the UN today and increasing their influence. The much larger question of what difference having more women in the UN makes is a task for future investigation. But, since women hold up "half the sky," having more women in all types of positions in the UN has the power to change perceptions of women's roles in societies everywhere.

Meyer and Elisabeth Prügl (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998); and Devaki Jain, *Women, Development, and the UN: A Sixty-year Quest for Equality and Justice* (Bloomington: IN: Indiana University Press, 2005);

²⁷ Among the sources are Carolyn Hannan, "Feminist Strategies in International Organizations: The United Nations Context," in *Feminist Strategies in International Governance*, Gülay Caglar, Elisabeth Prügl and Susanne Zwingel, eds. (NY: Routledge, 2013), pp. 74-91.