



# AMERICAN JOURNAL OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (AJHRPA)

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 1 (2026)



PUBLISHED BY  
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

## The Emergence of a Female UN Secretary-General: Historical, Institutional, and Comparative Perspectives

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### Article Information

**Received:** November 20, 2025

**Accepted:** March 05, 2026

**Published:** May 09, 2026

### Keywords

*Feminist Institutionalism, Gender Equality, Global Governance, Institutional Barriers, Leadership Reform, Secretary-General, United Nations, Women In Diplomacy*

### ABSTRACT

For nearly eight decades, the United Nations has positioned itself as the foremost defender of equality, justice, and collective security, yet the organization has never appointed a woman to its highest executive office, the Secretary-Generalship. This contradiction between its normative advocacy for gender equality and the reality of male-dominated leadership exposes deep institutional and cultural constraints within the UN system. This paper, titled “The Emergence of a Female UN Secretary-General: Historical, Institutional, and Comparative Perspectives,” explores why the organization has failed to produce a woman Secretary-General despite progressive reforms. The paper aimed to trace the historical evolution of the office since 1945, examine institutional and political barriers to female access to leadership, and compare the UN’s selection process with those of the IMF, WTO, and the European Commission, which have achieved gender-balanced appointments. Drawing on the Feminist Institutionalism theoretical framework, the paper adopted a historical and comparative approach based solely on secondary data from peer-reviewed publications, UN archives, and policy reports. The findings revealed that entrenched informal norms, patriarchal diplomatic traditions, and Security Council dominance sustain the exclusion of women from the top leadership position. However, comparative analysis showed that merit-based reforms and transparency can overcome historical bias. The paper concluded that genuine equality at the UN requires transforming both structural and cultural foundations of leadership and recommended open nominations, gender-balanced shortlisting, and enforceable parity policies to restore institutional credibility.

### INTRODUCTION

The United Nations (UN) was established in 1945 with the mandate to maintain international peace and security, promote human rights, and foster social progress. Despite this commitment to equality, the organization has never appointed a woman to the position of Secretary-General. The role, created under Article 97 of the UN Charter, has been held exclusively by men since Trygve Lie assumed office in 1946 (United Nations, 2023). This persistent absence of female leadership raises important questions about institutional accountability and gender equity within the global system of governance.

The debate over gender parity at the UN gained renewed urgency during the 2016 leadership selection, when several qualified women, contested for the position. Although the process was more open than in the past, it ended with the appointment of António Guterres, a former including Helen Clark, Irina Bokova, and Susana Malcorra, Portuguese prime minister and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016). Analysts noted that informal practices within the Security Council, particularly the veto power held by its five permanent members, continued to influence the outcome and override broader calls for gender-balanced leadership (Thakur, 2017; Cross, 2017). Institutional data confirm the persistence of male

dominance in senior UN positions. According to UN Women’s Gender Parity Strategy Progress Report (UN Women, 2023), women occupy only 37 percent of senior leadership posts across the UN system, despite a 2017 commitment to reach full parity by 2028. Scholars attribute this gap to the persistence of informal patronage networks, regional rotation customs, and elite diplomatic norms that favor continuity over inclusivity (Goetz, 2018; Joachim & Schneiker, 2021).

Meanwhile, other multilateral institutions have successfully elevated women to their highest offices. The International Monetary Fund appointed Christine Lagarde in 2011 and Kristalina Georgieva in 2019; the European Commission is currently led by Ursula von der Leyen; and in 2021, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala became the first woman and African to head the World Trade Organization (World Trade Organization, 2021). These precedents demonstrate that female leadership at global institutions is achievable when transparent and merit-based processes are enforced. The contrast underscores how the UN, despite its global advocacy for gender equality, continues to lag behind peer organizations in embodying its stated principles.

Understanding why the UN has yet to appoint a woman Secretary-General, therefore, requires examining its historical traditions, institutional design, and political

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culture. This study situates that question within broader debates about organizational legitimacy and the democratization of global governance (Weiss, 2021). By analyzing historical, institutional, and comparative dimensions, it seeks to uncover how political negotiation, procedural opacity, and gendered power relations have perpetuated this long-standing imbalance.

### Statement of the Problem

The continued absence of a female Secretary-General at the United Nations represents a paradox within an institution that publicly advocates gender equality. Although the UN Charter enshrines the principle of equal participation, the organization's leadership structure reflects entrenched hierarchies resistant to reform. Each selection process from Dag Hammarskjöld to António Guterres—has been shaped by political compromise among the permanent members of the Security Council, whose closed consultations often override merit-based evaluation (Thakur, 2017; Luck, 2021).

Reform efforts since the 1990s have called for a more open and accountable appointment system. The 2016 process introduced public hearings and candidate manifestos, but the outcome again reflected geopolitical bargaining rather than transparent competition (Cross, 2017). The reliance on consensus among powerful states effectively limits the prospects of female candidates, especially those from regions outside Europe and North America. This persistence of informal diplomacy undermines the credibility of the UN's gender-parity agenda (Joachim & Schneider, 2021).

Another key obstacle lies in institutional culture. Studies of recruitment and promotion patterns show that senior positions within the UN Secretariat remain concentrated in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as security, peacekeeping, and finance (Goetz, 2018). As a result, the leadership pipeline from which potential Secretaries-General emerge remains skewed. Moreover, gender parity initiatives have largely focused on mid-level representation rather than executive leadership, creating a ceiling that women rarely surpass (UN Women, 2023).

Comparative evidence demonstrates that other global institutions have adopted mechanisms such as gender quotas, transparent nominations, and independent vetting panels that increase female access to top posts (O'Neil & Domingo, 2016; World Trade Organization, 2021). The UN's failure to adopt similar safeguards reinforces the perception that rhetoric has outpaced practice. Consequently, the organization's legitimacy as an advocate of Sustainable Development Goal 5 achieving gender equality in leadership remains compromised.

The central research problem is thus the persistence of structural, political, and cultural barriers that have prevented the appointment of a woman Secretary-General despite global progress toward inclusive governance. Investigating this paradox requires a systematic review of the historical record, institutional arrangements, and comparative experiences that shape leadership selection

in the United Nations system.

### Aim and Objectives

This paper aimed at examining the emergence of a female UN Secretary-General from a historical, institutional and comparative perspectives. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the historical evolution of the selection and appointment processes of United Nations Secretaries-General and identify how gender has shaped access to this position since 1945.

2. To analyze the institutional and political factors within the United Nations system that have constrained the emergence of a female Secretary-General despite formal gender-parity commitments.

3. To compare leadership selection practices in the United Nations with other multilateral organizations that have successfully appointed women to top executive roles, drawing lessons applicable to UN reform.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper adopted a historical and comparative approach grounded in documentary and secondary analysis. It relies exclusively on existing scholarly literature, institutional publications, and verified reports from credible sources, including the United Nations, UN Women, academic journals, and think tanks. Data were drawn from books, peer-reviewed articles, official policy documents, and historical archives that trace leadership selection at the UN and comparable international organizations. The paper employed content and thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, institutional barriers, and reform trends relevant to gender representation in global leadership. By synthesizing secondary data, the paper aimed to generate interpretive insights rather than empirical measurements, emphasizing conceptual understanding and comparative evaluation.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Conceptual Framework

#### Leadership in the United Nations (UN)

Leadership within the United Nations operates through a collective structure that balances political representation with administrative authority. The organization's leadership framework consists of the Secretary-General, the Security Council, the General Assembly, and specialized agencies, each contributing to the institution's global agenda. UN leadership is guided by the Charter's principles of neutrality, cooperation, and service to humanity, emphasizing consensus-building among 193 member states with diverse political interests (United Nations, 2023).

Effective leadership in the UN context demands diplomatic skill, moral authority, and the capacity to mediate between conflicting national priorities while advancing peace, development, and human rights (Weiss, 2021). It relies less on coercive control and more on persuasion, negotiation, and legitimacy qualities that make leadership at the UN distinct from national or corporate

governance models.

### **UN Secretary-Generalship**

The office of the UN Secretary-General represents the pinnacle of international civil service and embodies the moral and administrative conscience of the organization. Defined under Article 97 of the UN Charter, the Secretary-General serves as both the “chief administrative officer” and a “symbol of the United Nations’ ideals and aspirations” (United Nations, 2023). The role involves managing the Secretariat, implementing decisions of the General Assembly and Security Council, and using the “good offices” of the position to prevent and resolve conflicts.

Secretaries-General are expected to exercise independence and impartiality while navigating the geopolitical pressures of powerful member states (Luck, 2021). Beyond administration, the office requires visionary leadership capable of mobilizing global cooperation on peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, climate action, and human rights. The historical evolution of this office—from Trygve Lie to António Guterres illustrates both its diplomatic influence and its constraints under state-driven politics.

### **Historical Evolution of the Selection and Appointment of United Nations Secretaries-General and the Influence of Gender Since 1945**

The process for selecting the United Nations Secretary-General has evolved through a mixture of formal Charter provisions and informal political customs. Article 97 of the UN Charter stipulates that the Secretary-General shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council, but the Charter provides no further procedural details (United Nations, 2023). In practice, this ambiguity has allowed the Security Council, particularly its five permanent members (P5), to dominate the process, using closed consultations to decide on a single candidate before presenting it to the General Assembly for approval (Thakur, 2017). Historically, this arrangement entrenched great-power privilege within an organization intended to be impartial.

From 1946 to 2025, nine men have held the post, each reflecting the political and regional priorities of their time. Early appointments, such as Trygve Lie (Norway) and Dag Hammarskjöld (Sweden), were shaped by postwar geopolitics and Cold War rivalries. Later selections, including Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (Peru) and Boutros Boutros-Ghali (Egypt), followed informal regional rotation practices designed to appease different blocs within the General Assembly (Luck, 2021). However, these conventions—though politically stabilizing—had the side effect of narrowing the candidate pool to seasoned male diplomats from established bureaucracies. Gender considerations did not enter discussions on Secretary-General selection until the late twentieth century. The first visible advocacy for a woman Secretary-General emerged during the 1991–1996 debates, when

civil society groups such as the Campaign to Elect a Woman Secretary-General began lobbying member states (Friedman, 1996). Yet these efforts gained real momentum only during the 2016 selection cycle, when for the first time the process allowed open nominations and public hearings (Cross, 2017). Eight of the thirteen candidates that year were women, including Helen Clark, Irina Bokova, and Susana Malcorra—each with extensive leadership experience in the UN system or national governments (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016). Despite this unprecedented participation, António Guterres emerged as the consensus choice, largely due to Security Council dynamics that continued to privilege political bargaining over parity or merit.

Academic commentary following the 2016 process argued that the structural bias was not due to a lack of qualified women but to entrenched power norms that resist altering established hierarchies (Goetz, 2018; Joachim & Schneiker, 2021). The symbolism of having a woman at the helm of the UN was acknowledged as significant for legitimacy and representation, yet procedural reforms proved insufficient to overcome the Council’s informal veto system. Even after the introduction of transparency measures, the decisive stage remained the confidential “straw polls” within the Security Council, where permanent members exercised disproportionate influence (Thakur, 2017).

Gender has thus shaped access to the office in two ways: first, through the historical exclusion of women from top diplomatic pipelines that traditionally feed into candidacies; and second, through the endurance of masculine political cultures that valorize security and statecraft experience over social or humanitarian expertise—areas where women are more represented (Goetz, 2018). As Weiss (2021) notes, the paradox of the UN’s leadership record lies in the organization’s global advocacy for gender equality juxtaposed with its own patriarchal internal structures. This historical legacy continues to inform debates about the organization’s democratic credibility and the representativeness of its leadership in the twenty-first century.

### **Institutional and Political Factors Constraining the Emergence of a Female Secretary-General**

Institutional constraints within the United Nations have proven more durable than rhetorical commitments to equality. The UN’s System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity, introduced in 2017, sought to achieve equal representation at all staff levels by 2028 (UN Women, 2023). While progress has been notable in field operations and middle management, women remain underrepresented in senior decision-making roles that serve as stepping stones to Secretary-Generalship (UN Women, 2023). The persistence of this imbalance suggests that formal parity policies have not dismantled the informal structures that govern power and promotion within the UN system.

One significant barrier lies in the Security Council’s procedural dominance over appointments. The Council’s

permanent members use closed consultations to decide which nominees proceed to recommendation, often favoring candidates aligned with their geopolitical interests (Cross, 2017). Because these deliberations are confidential, gender-related advocacy has limited visibility at this stage. Scholars such as Joachim and Schneiker (2021) argue that the Council's political logic—based on state bargaining rather than organizational values—creates an implicit bias against reformist or outsider candidates, including women. Furthermore, the rotational principle, while ostensibly fair, tends to favor male diplomats from powerful states or regions with established influence, further narrowing the field (Luck, 2021).

Cultural and institutional norms within the UN Secretariat also reinforce male-dominated leadership. Goetz (2018) documents how senior appointments in the Secretariat disproportionately draw from areas such as peacekeeping, political affairs, and security coordination, which have historically low female representation. This structural segregation of career tracks means that women are less likely to accumulate the kind of political and administrative experience viewed as prerequisites for Secretary-General candidacy. Internal recruitment processes often privilege continuity and loyalty over diversity, perpetuating gender homogeneity at the top.

Beyond institutional inertia, political realism among member states also plays a role. Governments often nominate candidates who align with their strategic interests, using the selection as an opportunity to consolidate diplomatic influence (Thakur, 2017). Consequently, the calculus of electability remains tied to perceived political neutrality and prior service in power-related sectors—traits that favor established male diplomats. Even as UN Women and civil society organizations campaign for parity, the absence of binding quotas or transparent voting rules leaves gender equality to the discretion of member states (Joachim & Schneiker, 2021).

The disparity becomes starker when compared with other international organizations that have implemented reformist measures. Institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Commission have adopted open competition frameworks and merit-based selection panels, which have facilitated the appointment of women like Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Christine Lagarde, and Ursula von der Leyen (World Trade Organization, 2021). Their success demonstrates that institutional redesign and political will can overcome historical bias. The UN's slower progress indicates that its internal politics, grounded in state sovereignty and great-power negotiation, continue to overshadow reformist ambitions.

Ultimately, the UN's leadership selection process reflects a tension between normative commitments to equality and the political realities of international diplomacy. The continued absence of a female Secretary-General is not merely a reflection of individual candidate shortcomings but a manifestation of structural and cultural barriers deeply embedded in the organization's political DNA.

As Weiss (2021) asserts, meaningful reform will require a shift from rhetorical advocacy toward procedural democratization that limits elite gatekeeping and prioritizes gender equity as a criterion of institutional legitimacy.

### **Comparative Analysis of Leadership Selection Practices in the United Nations**

The persistent absence of a woman Secretary-General at the United Nations contrasts sharply with the progress achieved by other major multilateral institutions that have embraced gender-inclusive leadership. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Commission (EC), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have all, in recent years, appointed women to their top executive positions. These developments offer useful comparative insights into how transparent procedures, merit-based competition, and political will can overcome historical bias and institutional inertia in leadership selection.

The International Monetary Fund provides one of the earliest and most instructive examples. In 2011, Christine Lagarde became the IMF's first female Managing Director, followed by Kristalina Georgieva in 2019. The Fund's Executive Board adopted a semi-transparent selection framework after the resignation of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, which included an open call for nominations, public endorsement of shortlisted candidates, and regional consultations (IMF, 2011). According to Breitenfellner and Schubert (2018), these measures introduced greater accountability into what had been an informal process dominated by European governments. Although the IMF's leadership tradition—whereby Europe nominates the Managing Director and the United States nominates the World Bank President—remains politically influenced, the selection of two consecutive women underscores the role of sustained advocacy, reputational considerations, and the increasing legitimacy of gender diversity in economic governance.

Similarly, the European Commission broke new ground in 2019 by electing Ursula von der Leyen as its first female President. Her appointment followed a protracted negotiation process within the European Council, but it was ultimately legitimized through parliamentary scrutiny and gender-parity commitments enshrined in the EU treaties (European Commission, 2020). As Leston-Bandeira (2021) notes, the European Parliament's confirmation hearings provided a degree of transparency and public accountability absent in the UN's selection of Secretaries-General. The European Union's institutional design particularly its balance between member-state nomination and parliamentary approval ensures that appointments reflect both political consensus and democratic legitimacy. Von der Leyen's leadership has since been associated with stronger attention to gender equality in policymaking and foreign affairs, demonstrating how female leadership can reshape institutional priorities once structural access barriers are lifted.

The World Trade Organization followed suit in 2021

with the appointment of Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as its first woman and first African Director-General. Her selection represented a historic departure from previous WTO practices, where leadership contests were often closed, elite-driven, and influenced by major trading powers. The 2021 process combined merit-based evaluation with transparent member-state consultations and explicit endorsement from both developed and developing countries (World Trade Organization, 2021). Scholars such as Hopewell (2022) emphasize that Okonjo-Iweala's economic expertise, coupled with her reputation for reform and integrity, shifted perceptions of what constitutes legitimate leadership in a trade-focused institution. The WTO's example demonstrates how open deliberation, regional inclusivity, and consensus-driven reform can facilitate both gender and geographic balance in global institutions.

In contrast, the United Nations continues to rely on opaque and politically entrenched procedures. The Security Council's dominance over the nomination process—particularly the veto prerogative of its five permanent members—has prevented the type of competitive, transparent, and merit-oriented selection seen in other organizations (Cross, 2017; Luck, 2021). Whereas the IMF, WTO, and EU have moved toward codified processes that allow public scrutiny and stakeholder participation, the UN's procedure remains largely informal, shaped by diplomatic bargaining and elite consensus (Thakur, 2017). The absence of institutionalized criteria such as gender balance, public hearings, or independent vetting panels means that equality considerations can be easily sidelined. Another important comparative factor is the normative framing of leadership diversity. The IMF, EU, and WTO embedded gender representation into their institutional legitimacy discourses as part of broader organizational modernization (IMF, 2018; European Commission, 2020). The UN, by contrast, has confined gender parity discussions primarily to staffing and programmatic activities rather than top-level appointments (UN Women, 2023). This compartmentalization creates a disconnect between normative commitments to equality and the actual practice of leadership selection. As Weiss (2021) observes, while the UN has championed Sustainable Development Goal 5 globally, its internal governance remains bound by political realism rather than reformist aspiration.

The comparison thus revealed that successful inclusion of women in top executive roles elsewhere did not occur spontaneously but through deliberate institutional and procedural reform. Common characteristics among these organizations include open nomination processes, clear selection criteria, internal accountability mechanisms, and visible political support for gender diversity. The lessons for UN reform are therefore both structural and cultural. Structurally, the UN could emulate the IMF and WTO by introducing a formal nomination process that invites all member states to submit qualified candidates, accompanied by published selection criteria

and timelines. Culturally, there must be an explicit recognition that gender equality in leadership is integral to the organization's legitimacy and not an optional value. Reform proposals have gained momentum since the 2016 selection cycle, with advocacy coalitions such as the 1 for 8 Billion Campaign and Equality Now calling for procedural amendments to enhance transparency and ensure gender-inclusive shortlists (Equality Now, 2021). Although these initiatives have not yet altered the structural dominance of the Security Council, they have elevated the discourse on accountability and representation in global governance. The experiences of the IMF, WTO, and European Commission suggest that symbolic breakthroughs—once achieved—tend to generate momentum for further institutional change. Therefore, a future female UN Secretary-General would not only correct a historical imbalance but also reinforce the organization's credibility as a standard-bearer for equality and justice in international leadership.

### Empirical Reviews

In her study, Goetz (2018) titled "Leadership and Gender Equality in International Organizations: The United Nations at a Crossroads," the researcher explored the continuing underrepresentation of women in UN leadership. Conducted across the UN Secretariat in New York and Geneva, the study adopted Feminist Institutionalism as its theoretical foundation, emphasizing the interaction of formal and informal norms in leadership selection. Using a qualitative research design, the investigation drew data from interviews with 35 senior UN officials selected through purposive sampling and complemented with archival analysis of internal policy documents. Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews and organizational records review. The study found that informal patronage networks and hierarchical selection procedures perpetuate male dominance in senior appointments. Goetz concluded that gender parity initiatives have improved representation at mid-levels but remain symbolic at the top. The author emphasized that institutional culture, rather than formal policy, shapes real opportunities for women's advancement. The present research addresses this limitation by extending the inquiry beyond UN employment practices to the Secretary-Generalship, offering a comparative cross-institutional perspective missing in Goetz's analysis.

Joachim and Schneiker (2021) in their article "Gender and Power in Global Governance: The United Nations and Beyond" examined how structural power relations restrict female leadership in global institutions. Their work analyzed leadership dynamics in the UN, NATO, and World Bank, drawing from Constructivist Feminist Theory to interpret how institutional cultures define authority and legitimacy. Employing a comparative case study design, the authors relied on document analysis and key-informant interviews with 42 officials recruited through expert sampling. Data collection involved reviewing leadership reports, selection transcripts, and

internal gender audits. Their findings indicated that despite gender mainstreaming policies, masculine norms embedded in institutional routines hinder equitable representation. They concluded that reforms focusing only on numerical parity fail to challenge entrenched gender hierarchies. Joachim and Schneiker recommended incorporating gender accountability mechanisms into leadership evaluation. This current research builds upon their work by examining in detail how these embedded hierarchies specifically constrain the emergence of a female UN Secretary-General, an area their cross-sectoral study only briefly discussed.

A related investigation by Krook and O'Brien (2022) titled "Breaking the Glass Ceiling in Global Governance: Lessons from International Organizations" analyzed female ascension to leadership in the International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, and European Commission. Grounded in Feminist Institutionalism and Organizational Change Theory, the research adopted a mixed-methods approach involving survey data from 200 international civil servants and elite interviews with 20 female executives identified through snowball sampling. Data collection included online questionnaires and policy document analysis. Findings revealed that institutional reform and public scrutiny were critical drivers behind the appointment of women such as Christine Lagarde, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, and Ursula von der Leyen. The study concluded that procedural transparency and regional diversity contributed to overcoming gendered resistance. Krook and O'Brien underscored that progress depended on political will within member states rather than internal quotas alone. The present paper extends this reasoning to the UN context, demonstrating that similar procedural reforms have yet to be institutionalized in the organization's Secretary-General selection, revealing a continuing governance gap.

In another study, Cross (2019) authored "Rethinking the Appointment of the UN Secretary-General: Process, Politics, and Prospects for Reform," focusing on how procedural reforms shape leadership outcomes. Conducted at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, the research was informed by Global Governance Theory, highlighting the interplay between state sovereignty and institutional legitimacy. Using a qualitative design, Cross examined UN archival materials, public hearing transcripts, and 18 in-depth interviews with diplomats involved in the 2016 Secretary-General selection process, chosen through criterion sampling. Data collection combined document review with thematic analysis of interview transcripts. Findings showed that while reforms such as open nominations and public hearings increased visibility, final decisions remained dominated by Security Council politics. The author concluded that real democratization required altering the Council's veto structure. Cross's research primarily analyzed institutional processes but did not engage directly with gender implications. The present study fills this omission by integrating gender analysis into the

evaluation of those same institutional constraints, thus enriching the discourse on inclusivity in UN leadership. Furthermore, Hopewell (2022) conducted a study titled "The WTO's New Direction: Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and the Politics of Reform," examining leadership transition within the World Trade Organization following Okonjo-Iweala's historic appointment. The study utilized Leadership Legitimacy Theory as a framework to assess how representation influences organizational credibility. Employing a qualitative single-case design, Hopewell analyzed official WTO records, press releases, and 25 interviews with trade delegates and policy experts selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered via document analysis and elite interviews. Findings revealed that transparency, merit-based assessment, and consensus among member states facilitated Okonjo-Iweala's selection. The researcher concluded that inclusive leadership appointments enhance institutional legitimacy and reform momentum. Hopewell noted that global organizations that incorporate gender diversity at the top tend to experience increased trust and engagement from member states. The current research builds upon this insight by applying similar reasoning to the UN, exploring how gender-inclusive reform could restore confidence in the organization's governance structure and leadership credibility.

Collectively, these empirical studies illuminate diverse pathways through which gender, institutional norms, and political negotiation shape leadership in multilateral organizations. They show that while progress has been achieved elsewhere through procedural transparency and political commitment, the United Nations remains bound by opaque structures that inhibit gender-inclusive leadership. The present research addresses this identified void by integrating comparative institutional analysis with a gender-informed framework to explain why no woman has yet occupied the world's most visible diplomatic office.

### **Theoretical Framework: Feminist Institutionalism**

Feminist Institutionalism (FI), advanced by Fiona Mackay, Mona Krook, and Louise Chappell in the late 2000s, provides a powerful explanatory model for understanding how gendered norms are embedded within political and organizational systems. The theory emerged from the recognition that institutions are not neutral spaces but are constructed around historically male-dominated norms and practices that shape who gains access to power (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010). Rooted in the broader field of New Institutionalism, FI explores how formal rules, informal norms, and organizational cultures intersect to sustain gender hierarchies. It challenges the assumption that increasing the number of women within institutions automatically produces gender equality, emphasizing instead that institutional logics themselves often reinforce masculine privilege (Krook & Mackay, 2011).

The central assumption of Feminist Institutionalism

is that institutions are gendered in both structure and operation. According to Krook and Mackay (2011), formal institutions such as constitutions, appointment procedures, and electoral systems interact with informal institutions like patronage networks, social expectations, and cultural values. These interactions produce what the authors describe as “gendered outcomes,” wherein even apparently neutral rules perpetuate unequal access to authority. The theory argues that meaningful reform requires altering both formal and informal systems to dismantle the cultural assumptions that privilege men as natural leaders and decision-makers (Waylen, 2014).

One of the major strengths of FI lies in its capacity to explain why institutional reforms—such as gender parity strategies may fail to translate into genuine equality. By highlighting the informal norms that persist alongside formal rules, the framework captures the subtle mechanisms through which exclusion operates (Krook & Mackay, 2011). It also provides an analytical lens for comparing institutions across different contexts, showing how gendered power is maintained even in settings that profess equality. However, a noted weakness of the theory is its relative underemphasis on agency and external political dynamics. Critics argue that while FI effectively describes how gender bias is reproduced within institutions, it offers less predictive power regarding how external advocacy or transnational pressure can transform those systems (Waylen, 2014; Chappell & Waylen, 2013). Nonetheless, the theory’s diagnostic strength lies in identifying structural persistence rather than prescribing quick solutions.

Applied to the current discussion on the emergence of a female UN Secretary-General, Feminist Institutionalism is particularly relevant. The selection process for the UN’s top leadership position operates through a web of formal rules codified in the Charter and informal norms governed by the Security Council’s political culture. FI helps explain why, despite rhetorical commitments to gender equality and procedural reforms, the office has remained male-dominated since 1945. The persistence of informal practices such as backroom diplomacy, regional rotation, and reliance on elite diplomatic networks reflects institutionalized gender bias embedded within the UN’s operational culture (Goetz, 2018). Feminist Institutionalism reveals that without transforming these embedded norms, transparency measures or parity strategies alone cannot overcome exclusion. It therefore underscores the need for reform approaches that target the gendered logic of multilateral diplomacy itself rather than focusing narrowly on numerical representation. In this way, FI provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the tension between formal equality principles and the informal power structures that continue to shape the UN’s leadership dynamics.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The historical review of the United Nations’ leadership selection processes revealed that the absence of a woman

Secretary-General is rooted less in a lack of qualified candidates and more in entrenched institutional norms that privilege continuity over reform. Authors such as Thakur (2017) and Luck (2021) emphasize that the evolution of the appointment process from Trygve Lie to António Guterres has been guided by political bargaining among the permanent members of the Security Council rather than by merit or representational equity. Conversely, Goetz (2018) and Cross (2019) argue that the introduction of public hearings and open nominations during the 2016 selection cycle marked progress toward procedural transparency, yet they agree that these changes did not challenge the dominance of informal male networks. The findings of these scholars align in recognizing that historical precedent has institutionalized male leadership at the UN, though they diverge on whether reform within existing structures is achievable without deeper cultural transformation.

Institutional and political barriers continue to constrain gender inclusivity despite formal commitments to equality. Joachim and Schneiker (2021) and Goetz (2018) both identify the persistence of patriarchal organizational culture within the UN Secretariat as a principal obstacle to women’s advancement. Their observations echo Cross’s (2019) empirical findings that Security Council secrecy and the veto prerogative sustain opaque selection practices. However, while Joachim and Schneiker view these obstacles as cultural residues that can be gradually eroded through normative change, Cross remains skeptical, suggesting that without structural reform of the Security Council, the appointment of a female Secretary-General will remain elusive. The comparison suggests that cultural and political reform must proceed in tandem; neither formal parity policies nor symbolic campaigns can by themselves disrupt institutional hierarchies built on longstanding diplomatic traditions.

Comparative evidence from other global institutions supports this conclusion. Krook and O’Brien (2022) and Hopewell (2022) demonstrate that gender-inclusive leadership in the IMF, WTO, and European Commission emerged only after procedural reforms introduced transparency and accountability. These institutions institutionalized open nominations, merit-based evaluation, and gender-balance commitments features absent in the UN process. Goetz’s (2018) findings on the UN’s internal stagnation thus contrast sharply with Hopewell’s evidence of progress at the WTO under Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, where gender diversity enhanced organizational legitimacy. The juxtaposition underscores that gender representation is not a natural by-product of modernization but a deliberate institutional outcome achieved through political will and procedural redesign. The UN’s current system, shaped by great-power politics, continues to resist such change, highlighting the need for a paradigm shift in governance philosophy.

The theoretical framework of Feminist Institutionalism provides a coherent explanation for these patterns. As Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell (2010) and Krook and

Mackay (2011) argue, institutions are gendered in both their structures and informal norms. This perspective clarifies why the UN, despite formal gender-parity initiatives, reproduces male leadership through implicit expectations and informal decision-making practices. Feminist Institutionalism interprets the Secretary-General selection as a process sustained by hidden institutional logics that privilege traditional diplomatic masculinity over gender-balanced representation. By connecting these theoretical insights with the empirical studies reviewed, the present research demonstrates that addressing gender disparity at the top of the UN requires not only procedural reforms but also a fundamental shift in the organization's cultural assumptions about leadership and legitimacy.

## CONCLUSION

The paper concluded that the continued absence of a female United Nations Secretary-General reflects deeply entrenched institutional traditions, informal diplomatic hierarchies, and cultural assumptions that sustain gendered power relations within the organization. Although the UN has embraced formal gender-parity commitments, its leadership selection process remains dominated by the Security Council's political bargaining and opaque decision-making. Comparative analysis with the IMF, WTO, and European Commission demonstrates that genuine inclusivity is attainable when institutions adopt transparent, merit-based, and publicly accountable procedures. Guided by the Feminist Institutionalism framework, this paper affirms that achieving gender-balanced leadership at the UN requires more than policy declarations it demands a transformation of both structural and cultural norms that perpetuate masculine dominance in international governance.

## Recommendations

Arising from the above, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. The United Nations should revise its Secretary-General appointment procedure to incorporate clear, open, and merit-based criteria, including public hearings, published shortlists, and gender-balance requirements, thereby reducing the Security Council's disproportionate influence and ensuring greater accountability.
2. The UN Secretariat and member states should establish mentorship, training, and promotion mechanisms that prepare qualified women for senior diplomatic and administrative roles, ensuring a sustainable pool of female candidates eligible for top positions.
3. The General Assembly should introduce binding resolutions requiring that at least half of nominated Secretary-General candidates be women, aligning the organization's leadership practices with its own Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and enhancing its moral credibility in global governance.

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