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## Madam SG: Can the UN Finally Smash Its Glass Ceiling?

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October 7, 2025

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*A new vision for global leadership was the theme at a forum held at the UN, above, led by Estonia and the International Peace Institute, Sept. 23, 2025. Civil society groups and some countries are campaigning hard to make the process to select the next UN secretary-general more transparent as well as to help ensure a woman gets the post. Both efforts are an uphill climb, advocates acknowledge.*

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The calls for a woman to lead the UN got top billing at a few sideline events held during the week of Sept. 21. At these gatherings, governments and civil society organizations warned that the legitimacy of the UN itself is at stake if the UN remains dominated by men.

“The question of having a woman as secretary-general: people often ask me why. And the answer is simple: why not?” said Susana Malcorra, a former Argentine foreign minister, 2016 secretary-general candidate and current president of Global Women’s Leader Voices ([GWL Voices](#)), a nongovernmental organization.

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[Helen Clark](#), a former New Zealand prime minister who also contested the 2016 race and headed the UN Development Program, noted the imbalance in the overall UN system. “Running for UN secretary-general is not a democratic process because only the P5 decides, which also raises the question of why the SG is not elected by the General Assembly,” she said. (The P5 are the permanent Security Council members: Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States.)

[Irina Bokova](#), a former head of Unesco and another 2016 contestant, added that electing a woman “will definitely strengthen the trust and legitimacy of the United Nations.”

All three women were speaking at a panel titled “What Will It Take to Elect a Madam Secretary-General?,” held at the [Ford Foundation](#) on Sept. 24.

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In his **speech** to the General Assembly, on Sept. 24, Chile's president, Gabriel Boric, officially endorsed Michelle Bachelet as a candidate. She is a former two-time president of the country, an ex-UN high commissioner for human rights and current **Club** de Madrid vice president. Boric praised her ability to "build bridges between the North and the South, between the East and the West." Elsewhere from the region, Dominican Republic President Luis Abinader also said "the time has come for a woman to lead the United Nations."

Bachelet, who also previously led UN Women, has not formally launched a campaign, but she told PassBlue that she was reflecting on the possibility. "Leadership capable of building bridges and forging consensus is what is needed today," she said in an email interview on Sept. 25. "Parity is not a symbolic gesture; it improves both effectiveness and legitimacy."

Only Rafael Mariano Grossi, an Argentine who heads the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency, has officially declared that he is running for the UN's top post. He says that gender should not matter in the race. (Like other candidates, he will most likely need the endorsement of his president; in this case, Javier Milei.)

In May 2025, Bolivian Vice President **David Choquehuanca** declared his candidacy, but his president, Luis Alberto Arce Catacora, did not mention Choquehuanca in his General Assembly **speech** during high-level week.

### Who Else May Be Running

Besides Bachelet and Grossi, a long list of potential candidates has been informally circulating for years. The possibilities from the Latin America/Caribbean region include Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley; Costa Rica's Rebeca Grynspan, head of UNCTAD (who **told PassBlue in September** that she would be "honored" to run); **María Fernanda Espinosa Cerezo**, an ex-president of the UN

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An **informal survey** in April 2024 by PassBlue on the most-popular candidates included write-in candidates: **Jacinda Ardern**, a former prime minister of New Zealand, came in first; and **Dunja Mijatovic**, a human rights expert from Bosnia-Herzegovina, was No. 2.

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### The P5 Resistance

Behind the public calls for a woman secretary-general, however, the permanent members of the Security Council are hanging tight to their control of the selection process, which has invariably lacked full transparency. In a remarkable display of unity, the P5, as they're known, **blocked proposals** in a formal revitalization plan by a working group in the General Assembly that would have strengthened its role in the selection procedure, including on such matters as advisory votes, civil society hearings and the option of voting on multiple candidates. (The General Assembly casts the final ballot on a candidate recommended by the Security Council.)

Moreover, the Trump administration may deliberately pick a male candidate, given the White House anti-diversity policies being carried out domestically and pushed at the UN with middling success.

The rare cohesion of the P5 striving to dominate the selection process was clear in a late-August meeting of the revitalization working group in which Russia explicitly said that it echoed positions taken by the US and UK that resisted stronger reforms.

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Despite such setbacks as the process begins this year, coalitions are organizing to keep what they say are the most important issues visible.

At the Ford Foundation event, GWL Voices, which unites former women leaders and diplomats in its advocacy work, the speakers — all female veterans of the 2016 race — described the double standards that women candidates faced in that contest. Guterres, a former prime minister of Portugal and ex-UN high commissioner for refugees, won.

Bokova recalled that support for women often felt like “lip service,” with doubts raised about whether female candidates were “strong enough.” Malcorra said women were judged inconsistently: “One speaks too softly, another too forcefully. Tell me what you want. For 80 years of men, no one questioned merit. But when women run, suddenly it has to be merit-based.”

Clark said that even if a woman emerges as a front-runner in the upcoming race, she would need “a strategy for overcoming vetoes” from the P5.



*Participants in an event focusing on electing a woman secretary-general, Sept. 24, 2025, from left: Richard Gowan of the International Crisis Group; Susana*

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in Gaza, conflict and famine in Sudan, far-right backlash against human rights and women's rights and crippling budget shortfalls linked to US funding uncertainty and withdrawal.

Guterres has launched austerity measures under his **UN80 reforms**, but how those proposals will play out will not be immediately clear. Whoever succeeds him will acquire what one diplomat called a "lean machine" under strain.

Civil society groups argue that this context makes the case even stronger for bold new leadership. **Maria Noel Leoni** is the **campaign director of GQUAL**, a nongovernmental organization that promotes gender parity in international tribunals and monitoring bodies. She spoke at a UN Trusteeship Council event, held on Sept. 23 and titled "**A New Vision for Global Leadership: Selecting the Next UN Secretary-General**," led by Estonia and the International Peace Institute, with 1 for 8 Billion, UNA-UK and Civicus.

At the event, Leoni said, "This election will shape whether the UN can rise to today's challenges both through the next secretary-general's leadership, but also through the credibility of the process itself."

### **Kick-Off With a Letter**

Despite the P5's efforts to keep the selection process from being more transparent, the General Assembly resolution adopting the revitalization working methods in early September strengthened certain requirements: that candidates file financial disclosures and that the selection process set a clear timeline for the race. Nominations are expected to open between now and December 2025, giving candidates months to campaign before a final decision is mostly likely made in late 2026.

Yet, the formal letter to begin the process in which candidates can declare their intentions is to be written jointly by the president of the General Assembly, Annalena

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into account the provisions of the General Assembly resolution on revitalization.”)

As the letter looms, it will map “notional events,” GQUAL’S Leoni said, adding, “This is the moment . . . [to] nominate women with proven dedication to gender equality.”

Indeed, activists warn that without meaningful reforms to the selection choice, the results will remain in the hands of the P5.

“The UNGA can still make the process more inclusive,” Donaldson of the 1 for 8 Billion campaign said, referring to the UN General Assembly, “including by holding straw polls of its own. There is a huge appetite for these sorts of reforms.”

Whether the UN’s 80th anniversary marks a profound turning point for the institution may depend on whether member states can translate public pressure into formidable action, at least in choosing a secretary-general. “A woman secretary-general would not only make history, it would reflect the world we live in,” Bokova said in her remarks at the Ford Foundation.

Bachelet herself framed the choice more broadly. “My experience both in Chile and the United Nations has taught me that there is no peace without human rights, and no sustainable development without equality,” she said in her email interview with PassBlue. “Listening attentively and building collective, inclusive solutions are the only ways to deliver responses that are both genuine and lasting.”

*We welcome your [comments on this article](#). What are your thoughts on the SG selection?*

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