



GLOBAL

Women world leaders warn of populist threat to equality

Brendan O'Malley 16 March 2019

A growing group of women world leaders is warning of the need to fight back against the erosion internationally of both women's rights and multilateralism, blaming the pushback on the rise of the 'macho-type strongman' or populist leaders.

The campaign was launched under the banner 'Women leaders – Voices for change and inclusion' on 28 February by Susana Malcorra, the former Argentinian foreign minister and former chef de cabinet to the Executive Office for the United Nations, along with Helen Clark, the former prime minister of New Zealand, and Irina Bokova, the former director-general of UNESCO.

In an open letter they warned of regressive "movements gaining traction, which seek to halt the gains made and erode the rights for women".

Speaking to *University World News* about gender empowerment for *UWN's* Transformative Leadership series, published in partnership with Mastercard Foundation, Malcorra said: "A lot of governments and political parties are starting to raise xenophobic voices and question the idea of women's rights – and also rights at large, but particularly women's rights – and empowerment.

"We feel we are at a crossroads. If we don't pay attention, we risk going backwards not forwards."

She said the rise of populism threatens to unravel many of the gains secured through multilateral efforts.

"It's is very sad to see there are places where policies are being reversed or questioned and the role [assigned to] women is very old fashioned and centered on the notion of a family structure led by a man. So the notion of sharing parental leave, being equal partners in child rearing are seen as questionable."

Redoubling of effort

In the letter the women leaders called upon leaders in governments, the private sector and civil society to reinvest in policies and in legal and social frameworks that will achieve

gender equality and inclusion. “Ours is a call for a redoubling of current efforts, which are insufficient in many places,” they said.

The group has now grown from the 26 who signed the letter to 43. They are all women who hold or have held very significant positions throughout the world, in all continents, cutting across all languages.

They include among their number President of Ethiopia Sahle-Work Zewde; former president of Ireland Mary Robinson; Christiana Figueres, former executive secretary of the UN framework convention on climate change; Radhika Coomaraswamy, the former special representative of the UN Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict; and, from the higher education sector, Valerie Amos, the former UN under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator and former UK secretary of state for international development who is director of SOAS University of London.

Malcorra said the world leaders’ campaign started with “a few of us recognising that there are two issues we care profoundly about that are at risk. One is women’s empowerment and gender equality and the other is multilateralism. And most of us have been leaders in the UN world or attached to the UN, so we are all profoundly multilateralist.”

The impetus came last year when some of them met in New York for a UN General Assembly debate and detected a growing and deep concern at the UN about pushback on the multilateral system, with “some of the countries who led the creation of the system now leaving it or casting doubts about its usefulness”.

The mood of anti-multilateralism was affecting “issues with women” too, she said.

Pushback

The **UN Commission on the Status of Women**, the principal global intergovernmental body dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, has not moved very fast in recent years. And while the Me Too movement has created “a lot of talk” and raised awareness, there is also pushback, she said.

“If we look at some of recent results in elections, the rise of conservative views that challenge the established notion in some countries, even the US, about the right to abortion rights obtained many decades ago, you start to wonder how much these policies are cemented, and where is the chance to move forward in places still missing them,” Malcorra says.

“If policy-making is not proactive on empowerment, there will be no equality until some time in the 22nd century. So we need to advance the agenda in a much faster manner. This notion of women’s empowerment is not a zero-sum gain; it’s about better opportunity for the whole of society in social, economic and political terms. It’s for all of us.”

Malcorra said empowerment means women taking a leading role in all avenues, in

businesses, in power positions, in private sector boards, as well as at the top of public organisations, such as universities – so in all places where women’s views need to be heard and can make an impact.

She believes the rise of the far right and the unravelling of rights stems from the 2008 financial crisis, “where citizens feel that the values, democracy as we know it, systems and institutions, did not deliver for them”, that while they did deliver for industries and for the financial sector, other people were left behind.

“This is particularly true in the developed Western world, where people feel there was nothing for them, not after the first, not after the third, not even after the 10th year of crisis.”

That led to the disenchantment of citizens with the political leadership and institutions at national level, but it also led to a questioning of the whole infrastructure created at international level, which was seen as ineffective, she said.

For some that has meant a harking back, drawn by the pied pipers of populism, to a dream of living in an era in days gone by, letting years of progress built through international negotiation and cooperation slip away as if they never really mattered.

Irreversible

Malcorra will have none of this. “Industry has changed, technology has changed, certain things are irreversible, we cannot think in terms of going back in history, but going forward in an inclusive manner, which in my view the 2030 Agenda represents and is the outcome of concerted effort in the UN.”

She argues that the benefits of creating a more gender-equal society, particularly in those countries where it does not exist, can be profound.

She points to examples in Africa, where Rwanda has been a leader in equal rights and now Ethiopia, where last year Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed chose to make his cabinet 50% female as an integral part of his transformative agenda, challenging the highly patriarchal society and triggering a discourse about gender equality.

“Our women ministers will disprove the old aphorism that women can't lead,” Ahmed told the Ethiopian parliament, arguing that women ministers would **help fight corruption, reduce inefficiency, and bring accountability and fairness to government.**

“It requires courage from leaders, particularly men, to bet on the impact of balanced representation on society,” Malcorra observed. “When you make representation as diverse as society, starting with gender, that makes a real sea change.”

A **2018 World Bank study** says 88% of countries have some restriction against women in the workforce in the constitution or in laws, preventing them from taking certain jobs; 59

have no laws against sexual harassment in the workforce; and in 18 countries women can be legally prevented from working by their husband.

But Christine Lagarde, head of the International Monetary Fund, **argues** that there is an incentive to change because countries ranked in the bottom 50% for gender equality, such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, could boost their economy by up to 35% by dropping discriminatory laws and giving women equal opportunity to work.

Malcorra says this means there is an “upside opportunity” to reform that is “huge for the world” but has not been exploited because men fear the loss of power.

So how can universities contribute to achieving equality?

“The role of higher education is huge,” Malcorra says. “When you look throughout the world, the percentage of women in higher education has increased dramatically and in many places is over 50%. But that doesn’t translate necessarily to women in equivalent jobs outside of higher education, so there is a placement issue once students have finished their degree.

“It is not because women are not trained or equipped in most countries in the world.”

Additional focus on engineering

“The one thing that needs additional focus is women educated in hard technology, engineering – I am an engineer myself and I know that this will help women move forward in some of the key drivers of change in future.”

When she looks at the gender balance in university faculty, she sees a situation that is “horrible – it is as bad a representation and as low as in the private sector”. She believes the answer might be to establish quotas, “so that you start to feel the minimum level of representation that allows you to consolidate a group that can bring real change”.

Malcorra thinks that minimum level is around 30%-35% of any group but this clearly is not there in most universities in the world, and below that level they are less likely to be listened to.

Malcorra and her fellow women world leaders are very pleased with the reaction they have had so far and have set out their stall to become multipliers of this message, spreading it at conferences, in commentary articles and via mentoring around the world.

“The challenge is to multiply and synchronise this message, so that it has a really powerful effect,” she told *University World News*.

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