

## Why it's time the United Nations is led by a woman

**With efforts towards gender equality stalling, voting in a first female head of the UN would provide powerful representation for half the world's population – and be good for all of it.**

**T**hirty years ago, the world saw an event that would sadly be hard to envision today: representatives from 189 countries endorsing a plan to improve the lives of women across the world. The event was the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing in September 1995. It was attended by almost 50,000 delegates, mostly women. The Beijing Declaration, as it came to be known, recognized that gender equality is not only a human right, but also transforms societies and enriches all lives.

Huge strides have been made since 1995. Women's access to education and reproductive health care has expanded. Maternal mortality has fallen, from 339 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000 to 223 in 2020. The number of countries with laws that prohibit gender-based discrimination in employment has nearly trebled since 1995, to 162 as of 2024. The proportion of women in parliaments has more than doubled in the same period, although as of 2024, 113 countries have still never had a woman serve as head of state or government, according to a report published by UN Women (see [go.nature.com/3g7on0j](https://go.nature.com/3g7on0j)), which was formed in 2010 in New York City as a source of funding and a driver of UN activities on gender equality.

The Beijing commitments also included a pledge to increase the number of women in research. Today, 70% of countries report on what they are doing to increase opportunities for girls and women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, as well as digital skills and training, an increase from 59% in 2019. The International Day of Women and Girls in Science, established by UN agencies in 2015 and held annually on 11 February, has helped towards that goal. In education more broadly, girls are now more likely than boys to complete secondary school in most regions (sub-Saharan Africa being a notable exception).

Since the Beijing conference, organizations and businesses of all shapes and sizes, along with UN organizations, have elected or appointed women to lead them. One study found that, as of 2020, 43 women have been at the helm of UN agencies<sup>1</sup>.

There is, however, a glaring exception: since its founding in 1945, the UN itself has only ever been led by a man. A campaign has begun to elect a woman as UN secretary-general, to succeed António Guterres when his second term ends at the end of 2026. There are several women equipped to

do the job and it's time to hand the reins to one of them – which is why *Nature* fully endorses this movement.

The case for a woman to lead the UN is grounded in principles of equality and justice, and supported by scholarship. Peace agreements signed by women are more likely to last<sup>2</sup>; conflicts are settled more efficiently and equitably when women sit on both sides of the negotiating table<sup>3</sup>; and human-rights activists, including advocates for women's rights, have been very effective<sup>4</sup>. Having a woman as UN secretary-general, as well as providing a role model, would make it more likely that the unique circumstances of women – such as being disproportionately affected by climate change<sup>5</sup> and experiencing long-lasting effects from conflict – are factored into decision-making at the highest levels.

That decision-makers need to be reminded that women are disproportionately affected is one indication that progress itself remains a work in progress. Indeed, for the first time in decades, some things seem to be going backwards; the United States and elsewhere, reproductive rights are being rolled back.

Restoring the right of women and girls in Afghanistan to receive an education and be able to work seems to not be a priority for the international community. Digital technology brings with it new forms of violence against women and girls, and “anti-rights actors are actively undermining long-standing consensus on key women's rights issues”, the UN Women report says. Since 2022, cases of conflict-related sexual violence have risen by 50%, with women and girls experiencing 95% of these crimes.

Almost one-quarter of country representatives to UN Women also reported that a backlash on gender equality is hampering implementation of the Beijing Declaration. At the annual meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York City last month, governments reaffirmed and updated the commitments made in Beijing – including that nations look at societal and economic problems through the lens of gender. However, the United States and Russia were among those expressing objections – a marked difference to their broadly positive contributions in 1995. US representative Jonathan Shrier criticized the declaration for lacking specific language on gender, arguing that “women are biologically female and men are biologically male”. He also used the opportunity to denounce the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

There are reports that UN Women is among the groups under pressure from the US administration to avoid terminology associated with diversity, equity and inclusion. The organization has said previously that it is committed to the “rights and equality of all people, including women in all their diversity, and all people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics”.

Appointing a secretary-general is complex. The UN Security Council (dominated by its permanent members, the United States, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom) must agree on a candidate, who is then put to a vote in the UN General Assembly. The situation will be further complicated by the fact that the Security Council today is

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intensely divided. That said, surely no country today can argue that no woman is qualified for the role.

We are not saying appoint a person solely because of their gender. Rather, we make this call to encourage UN member states to overcome the biases that often mean that the right person is overlooked. Appointing a woman would send a strong message that, 30 years on from the Beijing Declaration, the world's commitment to gender equality is not going away – and that it benefits all people, everywhere.

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2. Krause, J., Krause, W. & Bränfors, P. *Int. Interact.* **44**, 985–1016 (2018).
3. Ta-Johnson, V. P., Keels, E. & Bayram, A. B. *Int. Interact.* **48**, 1089–1120 (2022).
4. Sikkink, K. *Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2017).
5. Andrijevic, M., Zimm, C., Moyer, J. D., Muttarak, R. & Pachauri, S. *Nature Clim. Chang.* **15**, 138–146 (2025).

## How the Asilomar conference would differ today

**The 50th anniversary of a landmark biosafety meeting is an opportunity to ensure that the spirit of the event lives on.**

In 2008, *Nature* published a six-part essay series called Meetings that Changed the World. One of our choices was the International Congress on Recombinant DNA Molecules, held in February 1975 at the Asilomar Conference Center near Monterey, California – and known, ever since, as the Asilomar conference<sup>1</sup>. This meeting brought a temporary moratorium to an end and established the basis for rules to ensure that research on genetically modified organisms minimizes risks.

Delegates proposed risk-based principles to determine, for example, which experiments could be done on an open bench and which required physical containment. These were accepted by the US National Institutes of Health the following year, allowing research in the field to resume.

The anniversary of the conference, undoubtedly a landmark event for science and society, offers an opportunity to think about what it might take to move the dial on analogous issues today. It will almost certainly take much more than the single Asilomar meeting of some 140 scientists, government officials, lawyers and journalists.

Fifty years ago, the concept that you could snip genes from the DNA of almost any organism and insert them into a virus or bacterium in such a way that they could be copied each time the microorganism reproduced was in its infancy. DNA modification came with great potential for fields such as agriculture and medicine, and is now

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a complex and precise science. Just this week, David Liu at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was awarded the Breakthrough Prize in Life Sciences for inventing precision gene-editing tools<sup>2,3</sup>.

But in the 1970s, the then-new science was beset by concerns. One was that “introduced genes could change normally innocuous microbes into cancer-causing agents”, according to biochemist Paul Berg, one of the conference's main organizers and author of the 2008 essay. At the time, Berg was studying the genetics of infection and, in particular, whether simian virus 40 could produce tumours in rodents. In 1974, he had led a committee reporting to the US National Academy of Sciences that had recommended pausing potentially hazardous experiments, pending an international conference to discuss the next steps.

Much ink has been devoted to reflecting on this event – in terms of both what was discussed and what (and who) was left out. At a ‘spirit of Asilomar’ conference in February, it was pointed out that the original meeting lacked participation from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

And although it was not openly discussed at Asilomar, the desire to lift the moratorium was driven, in part, by the potential for universities to profit from the technology, as Matthew Cobb, a zoologist at the University of Manchester, UK, has explained<sup>4</sup>. It didn't take long for that discussion to become mainstream. By 1980, a decision of the US Supreme Court enabled DNA patenting, and a US federal law was passed granting permission for universities to hold intellectual-property rights and license patents for federally funded discoveries and inventions. This fuelled the growth of today's many science-based corporations.

But Asilomar's reach goes further. It is often invoked in relation to the organization of conferences in areas in which there are concerns about science, innovation and public policy. However, if Asilomar were to be held today, the process would be very different from that of 1975. There wouldn't be only one meeting, and there would be much more involvement of research communities from LMICs, as well as representatives from civil society, businesses, public officials, including regulators, and other stakeholders.

Such an event would also be harder to organize. As Berg wrote in 2008, “In the 1970s, most of the scientists engaged in recombinant DNA research were working in public institutions and were therefore able to get together and voice opinions without having to look over their shoulders” but “many scientists now work for private companies where commercial considerations are paramount”.

The Asilomar conference came about as a result of scientists taking responsibility, at an early stage, for the risks inherent in their work, and making an effort to think about regulations to minimize the harm that such work could cause. Today's researchers should draw inspiration from the organizers' courage and foresight, and build on Asilomar's foundations by making such events inclusive.

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