



**Economic Commission  
for Africa**

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# Women in Power and Decision-making in the United Nations System

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*All international instruments on Human Rights and Gender Equality state that men and women alike have the equal right to take part in decision-making structures and processes at all levels.*

Women's social, economic and political empowerment is a determinant for achievement of a transparent, efficient and accountable administration or organization, and constitutes a prerequisite for development in all walks of life.

The goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved without achieving the objective of equal participation of women and men in decision-making, reflecting the composition of our society.

Women's equal participation within the United Nations plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. Women's equal participation in decision-making is more than a simple request for justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account.

In this respect, United Nations General Assembly resolutions have reiterated several times, starting in 1984, the need to achieve *gender equality at all levels and in all occupational categories*. In addition, the Secretary-General's report, "Improvement of the status of women in the United Nations system" (A/59/357) paragraphs 96 -126 presents the results of a research-based analysis of the reasons for the slow progress in improvement of the status of women.

At the secretariat level, analysis of trends and hypothetical projections by department and office confirms the trends identified in the representation of women by grade. From 1998 to 2004, of a total of 38 departments and offices, eight had achieved the 50/50 gender balance goal. These departments and offices represent only 9 per cent (518 of 5,449 posts) of the total number of Professional and higher-level staff with appointments of one year or more.

# Status of Women and the Gender Balance Statistics in the UN Secretariat (as of 30 June 2005)

## Overall

- Women comprise 37.1 per cent (2,136 out of 5,754) of all staff in the professional and higher categories with appointments of one year or more. This represents a decrease of 0.3 per cent since 30 June 2004.
- Women comprise 43.0 per cent (1,110 out of 2,581) of all staff in the more restricted category of professional and higher level posts subject to geographical distribution. This represents an increase of 0.7 per cent since 30 June 2004.

## Women at the Senior Policy-making Levels

<b>Positions</b>	<b>Percentage of women as of 30 June 2004</b>	<b>Percentage of women as of June 2005</b>	<b>Trend</b>
Under Secretary-General	16.7	16.2	Decrease
Assistant Secretary-General	17.1	18.8	Increase
D-2	27.6	26.7	Decrease
D-1	29	27.2	Decrease

## Appointments

- At all levels, women comprised 38.2 per cent (152 of 397) of appointments. The goal of gender balance in terms of appointments was met and exceeded at the P-2 level only.

<b>Positions</b>	<b>Percentage of women as of June 2005</b>
<i>Under Secretary-General</i>	11.1
<i>Assistant Secretary-General</i>	33.3
D-2	20.0
D-1	18.2
P-5	30.7
P-4	39.5
P-3	37.0
P-2	51.0

To give celebration of the United Nations International Women's Day a practical dimension and to illustrate the progress achieved in the critical area of gender equality in power and decision-making, we requested three women professionals, based in Addis Ababa and holding senior decision-making positions in the UN, to relate their professional journey within the system and share with the readers their experience and their expectations with regard to this issue.

This brochures includes the replies of these three senior UN Officials to some of or all the questions ECA has asked them on the theme topic of "Women in Decision-Making" that was chosen this year to celebrate International Women's Day.

# QUESTIONS

## Question 1:

As you may know, the theme chosen by the UN for this year's celebration of International Women's Day is "Women in Decision-making". In your view, to what extent is women's participation in decision-making a priority in promoting gender equality and the advancement of women in Africa?

## Question 2:

Would you share with the readers your experience in reaching your current status as a decision-maker?

- How did your life experience prepare you to play the role of a decision-maker?
- Please share with the readers your experience in accessing decision-making positions in the UN.

## Question 3:

- As a woman decision-maker, have you experienced difficulties in the course of discharging your duties?
- How do you balance your professional role and your family role?
- How important do you think it is for women in decision-making positions to consciously mentor young women in the UN system?
- What advice would you give to women aspiring to be decision-makers in the UN or elsewhere?

## Question 4:

What are the key linkages between women's economic and political empowerment and their participation in decision-making?

## Question 5:

To what extent do you think women's leadership is more likely to result in transformation of institutions, policies and processes than male leadership?

## Question 6:

How do you assess progress achieved so far in light of the global evaluation of Beijing+10 and the World Summit on the Millennium Development Goals?

- To what extent is this evaluation accurate and faithful to the reality on the ground?

- What are the weaknesses or obstacles that may have hindered the promotion of gender equality in decision-making?
- What do you think is needed to bring about change and enforce effective and equal participation of women and men in decision-making?

### **Question 7:**

Liberia has recently elected its first woman President, and in Germany and Chili, two women got the top jobs. What are your comments about these developments?



## Ms Regina Amadi-Njoku Regional Director of Field Programmes in Africa, ILO

### Answer 1:

African women have always had important roles in decision-making in all spheres of community life. The traditional methods of decision-making in most African communities were based on what I will call “Groupship” as opposed to “Leadership”. Decision-making was influenced by all the stakeholders; wives, daughters, young men, older men and so forth, representing all the different components of the community. Moreover, women were called upon to make important decisions for production, reproduction, care of the sick, community management and so forth.

African women in traditional societies have their roles in decision-making both in the family and the community. The modern world of work and politics has changed that. The modern work place has imposed new gender relations and is completely dominated by males.

This is a challenge to qualified professional women. Professional women must be empowered to take decisions alongside their male counterparts systematically and strategically. The African woman does well everywhere, except in the formal work force. (Witness the Mama Benzes, the community leaders, the spiritual leaders, the writers and so forth).

### Answer 2:

My experience with reaching the status of decision maker began in my home. I was the firstborn of my parents’ children. My mother died early, which forced me to assist my father in decision-making about my siblings.

My mother was educated. She was a social worker and later became the Director of the YWCA. I adored my father, but my real role model was my grandmother, who was a brilliant businesswoman and strict Anglican. She was the first person who introduced me to the concept of socially responsible business. Moral and financial independence were her *raison d’être*. She chided her son for being a salaried worker instead of starting his own business. A real take-charge individual, she was powerful and successful.

Another factor that I find important is that I went to all-girls schools until the age of 16 when I entered university. Our role models were successful teachers and disciplinarians. Girls were encouraged to be leaders in these schools. By the time one got to University, one had already internalized the belief that you can be a successful leader.

Access to decision-making positions requires first and foremost the appropriate skills. This is especially so if you are a woman, because women are judged harshly in these positions. The second is knowledge and awareness of how to manage people, create win/win situations, listen carefully and take all information with a grain of salt. The third is a results-oriented, take-charge attitude.

A woman in leadership position must display leadership skill, team spirit and, most of all, she must have a strong character to overcome the obstacles that will inevitably be placed in her way. Furthermore, the culture, structure and political will of the respective institution are crucial in offering and shaping women opportunities for decision-making.

### **Answer 3:**

I never separate the skills needed to run my family from those needed to run an organization. Women's leadership skills start with the family. We must multi-task; we must have a team spirit; we must budget; we must delegate; we must encourage; we must resolve conflict fairly; we must be productive, and so forth.

Moreover, being a professional is an integral part of keeping the family functioning. A well-functioning family is a great asset to any professional. Family members must be exposed to the woman's professional life just as she must participate in every aspect of her family's life. They are interdependent systems and we need both.

This is why I believe that women with families should be encouraged to pursue their career. Institutions must be encouraged to become more family friendly because home affects work and work affects home.

Yes, women are excellent role models for women. Moreover, they have an obligation to recognize talent and promote other women.

My advice to women aspiring to be in a decision-making position, aside from what I have said earlier, is to pace themselves. Be balanced. Do not become a total "workaholic". Balance leisure, family and work. You will be a much better professional if you do so. Perfectionism and unreasonable goal setting and time management are not sustainable. If you want to make it to the top you have to prepare for the long haul, and enjoy the ride.

### **Answer 4:**

My experience has been that the elite women, who are often the ones in formal decision-making positions, are rarely the ones on which politicians depend to get votes. It is the community leaders, the market women, and the ones who know their communities who can really affect the outcome of politics. And politicians know this. They defer to them in organizing their constituents.

### **Answer 5:**

Women's leadership alone cannot work. Both men and women must work together to transform institutions. They must work together from an understanding of the importance of their roles for the common good or goal. Successful men have always had women partners to help them in decision-making. Likewise, it is crucial for women to have supportive male partners if they are to become successful leaders. We need both men and women approaching the issues from different perspectives, in order to make the right decisions.

### **Answer 6:**

Weaknesses or obstacles: Gender bias is like race bias. People perceive women with a certain set of predetermined attributes ranging from the mildly positive to the absolutely lethal. Women are intuitive, irrational, emotional, incapable of making objective decisions etc. Moreover, women are marginalized from the 'men's power club'. But I am a firm believer that whatever is used against you can be used for you. This is why women need male mentors and partners.

A woman who enters the 'men's world' of management is the new kid on the block. No one may listen when she has a good idea, but as soon as her male colleague repeats the same idea he is likely to be taken seriously. Women must work extra hard. They must have access to the boss. They must demonstrate that their decisions fit into management's views; and they must learn to put everything in writing. We must learn to defend ourselves with patient dialogue. There is no militant solution to gender equity.

Most importantly, we must struggle to build a critical mass of professional women before we start to see results in the decision-making stratum.

### **Answer 7:**

It is heart warming to see that countries that have never before had a woman President now have one. And what women! These are inspiring women who are not simply clones of their male counterparts. These women believe in democracy, in human rights, in the benefits of cultural diversity, in the obligation of the State to its constituents. All of them are aware of the potential ravages of globalization as well as its multiple benefits if fairly utilized.

However, let us not forget that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were 32 women Presidents in the world. About 24 of them presided during the last decade of the century. Women are making strides in governance and men are getting used to seeing women leaders. Furthermore, women are now voting for women.

Mexico 1975 culminating in Beijing 1995 has had the effect of developing women's political savvy. The world is changing and this is evident.



**Ms. JOSEPHINE OUEDRAOGO**  
**Acting Deputy Executive Secretary**  
**UNECA**

**Answer 1:**

I think that the question is rather to know how important is women participation in decision-making as a priority for the advancement of women and as a precondition to achieve gender equality. We should first remember that decision-making takes place at all levels: within the family, within one's community, at the sectoral, national and international levels, as well as in the private and public sectors.

A close look at things will show us that women's participation in decision-making as a whole is still very limited. No wonder then that all changes taking place in our society at all levels and in all walks of life did not necessarily lead to reduction of the gender gap.

Let me give you an example: at the community level, local councilors, who are mostly men in the majority of our countries, are usually fighting to strengthen infrastructure (roads, schools, medical centres, and so on.). However, while doing this, they don't necessarily seek to promote the access of a greater number of girls to education, the access of women to land, property or improved healthcare services, etc.

**Answer 2:**

A. The first time I got a decision-making position was in 1984 when I became a Minister. What helped me to access such a high-level position? Two factors I would say:

1. The first factor is linked to my professional record: before I was charged with ministerial functions, I worked as a sociologist in an important consultancy bureau for almost eight years. After that I was appointed as a Research Director within the framework of a major government project initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture to promote hydro-agricultural installations and rural migrants.

Although I was not dealing with politics, I had an opportunity through my professional activities to talk about women issues within the framework of the country's development policies and strategies. I also used to write papers and presentations on these issues whenever I had the opportunity to do so. This must have been one of the reasons why President Sankara thought I could be useful in his Government and entrusted me with the Ministry of the Family and National Solidarity.

2. The second factor that contributed to my nomination was undoubtedly the political will of President Sankara himself who was anxious to promote women's access to decision-making positions. That is how, for the first time in the country's history, five women were appointed in the same Government as Ministers of Budget, Environment, Health, Culture and Family Promotion.

B. Honestly, I don't know what in my life has prepared me to play the role of a decision-maker, because to reach such a position in the public sector, the political arena or even the private sector, it is not enough to have the required technical skills since so many people have them.

You have to be prepared by life for it... I don't think that someone can just decide to get a decision-making position ... Different circumstances and factors can give you a push because you already have the character and the disposition of someone who wants to "lead" rather than be "led" ... You can access a decision-making position also because you care about people and people's interests matter to you.

A decision-maker is someone who knows how to formulate a policy, how to put things into perspective and how to force change. Otherwise, you are a decision-maker out of mere ambition and this can only lead to failure and to generating frustrations around you. Unfortunately, this is what is happening today in different political and institutional spheres. Some wouldn't hesitate to fail people unfairly, manipulate them or even commit crimes to get a powerful position.

As far as I am concerned, I think that my father's journey as a politician has influenced me, but also my mother's personality. Though illiterate, she knew how to take care of her family and run the activities of the larger family during my father's absence.

This is all the more true whenever I am in charge of a technical dossier or a given programme. I take time to put things into perspective. I think I am more inclined than many others to take various human aspects and community interests into consideration that others would not perceive right away.

C. How did I manage to occupy decision-making positions within the UN? You know, there is a wealth of skills, knowledge and experience within the UN. There is also a fierce and vehement competition to get senior positions due to such wealth, but also because of many other structural and cultural factors that made it more difficult for women to access decision-making positions.

As you know, the Beijing Platform for Action outlined and recommended concrete actions to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures, and

to increase their capacity for participation in decision-making processes and bodies. Within the UN system, such recommendations started to be implemented, but despite the low pace at which this is being done and despite the shy attempts made in this regard, I think I have benefited from this progress.

On a more personal note, I think that having occupied ministerial positions and having proven myself on the ground gave me a certain political insight and a more integrated vision of the various issues the institution covers in its mission. Besides, the seven years I spent heading ACGD have also enriched my experience as a decision-maker, helped me fine-tune my strategies and test the holistic approach I have always tried to adopt in my work.

In the final analysis, I think that it lies with those who are considering you for a decision-making position to use their discretion, good judgment and wisdom to choose among the candidates and decide who is the worthiest and the most suitable for the job.

### **Answer 3:**

I can say that the difficulties I encounter as a woman in my present decision-making position are multiple. One is never prepared well enough to face them. The first difficulty is due to the attitude of those men who think that no reason is good enough to justify that a woman - rather than them- has been chosen for a senior position.

Other men sometimes spend their time trying to undermine your capacities and underline your limitations, exaggerate them or even provoke them, just to rejoice and prove their superiority and merits. Some simply “rebel” and refuse to recognize your authority or even accept you as an authority in your own field.

Generally speaking, only a small minority of men would have such negative or hostile attitudes. The majority of my male colleagues are objective, collaborative and eager to maintain very professional relationships with me. Many of them constantly affirm their readiness to support me disinterestedly and often provide me with very constructive advice.

The second problem stems from the fact that it is difficult to reconcile your private life, your family and your professional obligations when you are holding a decision-making position. Due to such requirements, you have to travel constantly, leave your office late in the evening, meet the demanding obligations of public life, (invitations, public relations, functions etc...). This is so trying for a woman's private life, whether she is married, or a mother or just single.

As you know, UN activities have increased a lot, so much so that general and professional staff alike are often deprived of rest for several weeks in a row. I think this is inhuman

and can be even counterproductive and detrimental to the health of the staff. Worse, I am not even sure that such an extra load of activities will really increase the efficiency of various institutions or make a bigger impact on the ground.

Due to all these constraints, women in decision-making positions within the UN have no time, unfortunately, to coach and guide young women professionals, newly recruited. Yet, we must be constantly aware of the fact that we are “mentors” through our attitudes, behaviour and achievements. Whether we like it or not, we can be “bad role models” or “good role models” because we are being watched, constantly...

To those women whose aspiration is to access a decision-making position within the UN system, I want to give the following advice:

1. You must always have moral principles and strong values. It is important to respect others, to encourage them and to know how to motivate them. You need to be fair with everyone and be aware of the main reason for which you are making sacrifices. Also, never lose your identity as a woman.
2. To be successful is not only due to having excellent technical skills, but also to know how you can use these skills and competencies to achieve the goals and objectives of a given institution.

### **Answer 5:**

There is a strong link between the economic and political empowerment of women and their participation in decision-making. A woman who is overwhelmed with problems of survival doesn't have time to attend public meetings where she can express herself. Other women, who may be more available, may not be informed or trained in areas of public or national interest and cannot take part in the political activities in their community.

We must therefore train women, invest in and develop adequate infrastructure able to alleviate the burden of unpaid work, and provide women with more opportunities to participate effectively in decision-making.

### **Answer 6:**

I believe that women's leadership can bring about positive changes in institutions, policies and processes. It is true that we have inherited institutions and structures constructed by men according to their own vision of “progress”, “efficiency” and “profitability”. We inherited governance systems and paradigms tailored according to men's vision of “democracy” and “justice”. The results seen today prove that this male vision discounted women's female perspectives and interests, although women represent at least 50% of the active population.

For women to make a difference, they should identify the type of change they want to see in various policies, institutions and processes, so as to make them more equitable, more human, less alienating and more efficient. I think we women are still obliged to reflect on such issues and could formulate a “Moral Code” that all women in decision-making should seek to abide by and implement.

### **Answer 7:**

Talking about the recent election of women Presidents in Liberia and Chile, and a woman Chancellor in Germany, I think that women’s access to such supreme positions through free and transparent elections proves that there are worthy and capable women in the world, including Africa, who can lead their nations.

This also proves that whenever a normal environment is provided and guaranteed, women can become Presidents. Last but not least, the access of these women to the Presidency will boost women’s confidence and self-esteem as a whole all over the world. It will also motivate other women to engage in politics and prove that they deserve to get their fair share of power.



**Ms. Monique Rakotomalala**  
**MD, MPH**  
**Resident Representative of UNFPA**  
**in Ethiopia**

**Answer 2:**

In my adolescence, I didn't have any visions to be a decision-maker. But I wanted to help to give poor women in my country a better life. In Madagascar, gender inequality was not an issue. In our *lycee*, boys and girls were going to the school together.

Thanks to my powerful mother who directed us to reach at least university level education, I and my seven sisters and my brother received good educations. This was all from the mindset of my mother. Of course we were privileged to be educated and it has helped us very much in our lives.

When I was in college in France, I decided to be a medical doctor. Of course, importantly, I was given the chance to decide between science and literature. All my sisters decided to study Arts. For me, becoming a medical doctor was the solution to reach something more. I saw the situation in my country, and how the women had a desperate and difficult struggle in poverty.

I studied 12 years in France and then moved back to Madagascar where I set up my Medical Centre. As Chief Medical Officer, I was dealing mostly with poor women having 8 to 10 children and working hard in their households, much as any African woman has to do. What was different in Madagascar was that the men would help them. Still, because of the poverty, their life was a struggle. I set up a Family Planning Programme for women and started educating them. Our message was, "If you survive, your children will survive".

When I looked at the poor women who were voiceless, morally harassed and trying to find any means to find food for their kids, I wanted to be more strategic in my actions. I became an Adviser in the Ministry of Health and worked with immunization campaigns and setting up diarrhea prevention programmes for children. When a mother saw her child surviving, she was more likely to start using family planning. This was my victory. These were my first steps in decision-making.

Later, I also worked with the UN as a national counterpart for UNICEF/UNFPA programmes. As Programme Director for Maternal and Child Health, and Family Plan-

ning, I saw strongly that the UN was working for the country and working closely with the Government.

This question is important – how can we better develop the recipient country instead of dictating and telling it what to do? Now representing the UN side, I still think that good political dialogue with our counterparts is essential.

I was raised in the 1960s and 1970s and read Simone de Beauvoir “Le deuxième sexe”, Gisele Halimi “Choisir” ... etc. The women’s liberation struggle was very important for me. When I was studying, I was really engaged in the movement. And when I returned to Madagascar, it was clear that I wanted to work for women’s empowerment. The society in my country was open enough to accept new ideas.

Later, when I had my first position in the UN in Niger, it was very different as the religious leaders were antagonistic to reproductive health and family planning issues. However, working with women associations at the grassroots on gender concerns helped me to advance the new Programme of Action (POA) in Cairo, which was adopted in 1994.

My 15 years with UNFPA were concentrated on putting gender at the core of our actions. Our strong and dedicated female Executive Directors, Dr. Nafis Sadik and now Ms. Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, have helped me to fulfill this mandate. The issues that UNFPA promotes such as Family Planning, women empowerment and prevention of feminization of HIV/AIDS are in some countries so sensitive that if we don’t have strong leadership, we cannot reach our goals. I am very thankful for the role models and decision-making power these women have given me.

### **Answer 3:**

I feel that I have balanced my professional and personal life well. I decided to return to Madagascar when our children were young, since the extended family there would help in socialization of the children. Of course, leaving France was financially a sacrifice for my husband and me. But I wanted my children to have roots and it was my duty to provide this possibility for them. Of course, there are sacrifices but you have to face and handle them. My son was sent to study in France when he was 15 and my daughter when she was 16.

My husband, who is a surgeon, could not always follow me on my assignments. In terms of performance, my career has been very rewarding professionally. I think it is because I feel I am serving the population that I work for.

Regarding mentoring, as a medical doctor, it is a responsibility to teach skills to my young colleagues. Mentoring is a way of life. I have mentored both male and female col-

leagues. Since my parents pushed me to be where I am now, I want to push my younger colleagues in the UN system.

In terms of advice, if you believe in what you are doing, step-by-step you will go further. The UN is a male-driven organization much like many others in this world, but my advice is to keep up, be patient, and you will be rewarded. As Angela Merkel and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf are now Chancellor and Head of State respectively, next year in South Korea, Ms. Mark could be the first female President.

There is still a long way to go but these achievements are already transforming the world. I believe the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the century for women, and that little by little, the gender inequalities will disappear.