

What the world needs now...! Women leaders, multilateralism and international co-operation

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Although the rhetoric of disruption has been growing exponentially over recent years in relation to a wide variety of activities, no-one expected the level and types of disruption now being experienced globally because of COVID-19. This new disruption is heightening inward-looking unilateralism that has gained ground in recent years. As Damtew Teferra, Professor of Higher Education Training and Development at the University of Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa commented in early April, 'The simplistic, but populist view that a country's internal problems reside external to its borders has slowly trickled into the psyche of many countries and has, in effect, muscled out multilateralist views and principles' (Teferra, 2020).

Multilateralism became prominent in the aftermath of World War Two as a process of organising and co-ordinating relations between three or more nation states based on the principles of 'an indivisibility of interests among participants, a commitment to diffuse reciprocity, and a system of dispute settlement intended to enforce a particular mode of behaviour.' The intention was to promote greater inclusiveness and prevent discrimination (Scott, 2015; Kwakwa, 2017). The gradual weakening of these principles and the institutions that have promoted international multilateral collaboration and co-operation by the rise of unilateralism 'in major global power centres' (Teferra, 2020), has been questioned and challenged by increasing number of leaders most of who are women.

COVID-19 provides an opportunity to chart a new course, one drawing on the insights of women leaders at the helm of nations that have managed to minimise the pandemic's devastation, in stark contrast to the approach taken by 'strongmen' who have used the crisis 'to accelerate a terrifying trifecta of authoritarianism: blame-"others," capture-the-judiciary [and], demonize-the-journalists' (Wittenberg-Cox, 2020). From Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland and Norway in Europe, to Taiwan and New Zealand in the Asia Pacific, women leaders have outperformed their male counterparts (Dent, 2020) by taking decisive action informed by humanitarian and co-operative principles (Henley and Roy, 2020). These efforts have been extended through international multilateral efforts led by women and by increased advocacy of multilateralism for dealing with health and gender issues.

On 20 April 2020, a Women Leaders Virtual Roundtable on COVID-19 and the Future was convened by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women, and Gabriela Ramos, OECD Chief of Staff and Sherpa to the G20 'to address the disproportionately negative impact the COVID-19 pandemic has on women and girls and to identify and prioritize policy measures that facilitates a more gender-inclusive recovery path'. Participants included Heads of State and Government representatives, H.E. Sahle-Work

Zewde, President of Ethiopia; H.E. Katrín Jakobsdóttir, Prime Minister of Iceland and Chair of Council of Women World Leaders; H.E. Marta Lucía Ramírez, Vice-President of Colombia; Marlène Schiappa, Minister of State for Gender Equality and the Fight against Discrimination, France; and Nadine Gasman, President of Inmujeres Mexico, as well as a plethora of representatives from civil society, intergovernmental and philanthropic organisations (OECD, 2020). Equally significant was the launch on 27 April 2020 of the United Nations' new women-led social and economic recovery initiative, 'Rise for All' to obtain support for the United Nations (UN) Response and Recovery Fund and Framework. Introduced by UN Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed, the **#RiseForAll** solidarity campaign in response to COVID-19 aims to give voice to women leaders from around the world to promote solutions to the current global crisis. Included among them are President Sahle-Work Zewde of Ethiopia, Prime Minister of Norway Erna Solberg, Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser of Qatar, and Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Mottley. This initiative 'reflects the call of the 2030 Agenda to build more resilient societies and a future that is sustainable, inclusive, and just' by working to ensure 'a universal, country-sensitive response that conveys a "fundamental commitment to environmental sustainability and gender equality"' (UN, 2020).

The call for greater multilateralism has been led by women over numerous years in terms that are becoming even more important to ensure the charting of a new course for the future. Over five years ago, in October 2014, then Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde, argued that a 'new multilateralism' was needed to generate policy momentum that could overcome the 'new mediocre' level of world economic growth (Lagarde, 2014). As she stressed in 2019, a new multilateralism is needed 'to galvanize global cooperation' that is 'more focused on people' and that 'must be inclusive, more accountable and more transparent' (Xiong, Gao, Hu, 2019).

The importance of multilateralism has also consistently been raised by other women leaders around the world. In 2017, Theresa May noted, 'the values of fairness, justice and human rights' underpinning multilateralism had 'created the common cause between nations to act together' in the pursuit of shared interests (AFP, 2017). She therefore called on world leaders to fight for its preservation when speaking at the United Nations (UN) in December 2018 (James, 2018). In Australia, in 2017, the Honourable Penny Wong, then Leader of the Labor Opposition in the Australian Senate and Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, commented that at 'a time of disruption', convergence in 'the South East Asian region is the essential pre-requisite' for Australia 'to develop the kinds of bilateral and multilateral cooperation' that can enhance 'stability, grow prosperity and deliver strategic security' (Wong, 2017). On 18 April 2020, Wong stressed again that Australia needed international cooperation and 'to be very active in making multilateral institutions like the UN and the WHO work better' (Hurst, 2020).

About a year earlier, in March 2019, Susana Malcorra (UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's Chief of Cabinet, 2012–15 and Argentina's Foreign Minister, 2015–17), Helen Clark (UN Development Program Administrator, 2009–17 and New Zealand Prime Minister, 1999–2008), and Irina Bokova (Bulgarian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister, 1995–97 and UNESCO's Director-General, 2009–17), formed a Women's Group with the goal of raising their 'voices on matters regarding women equality and multilateralism'. In an

Open Letter, signed by 25 women from Africa, Canada, Ireland, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka and the USA, multilateralism was presented as a vehicle to support the 'empowerment of women across all ambits of society' because 'a reality in which opportunities, freedoms, and rights are not defined by gender has not been universally attained' and 'efforts to roll back hard-won rights and frameworks' were increasing (Leimbach, 2019).

A few months later, The Honourable Patricia Scotland QC, 6th Commonwealth Secretary-General, emphasised 'the global benefits of multilateral cooperation through the Commonwealth and other international bodies' during a lecture to high commissioners, ambassadors, other representatives from governments and representatives from international organisations attending the Global Strategy Forum. Multilateral organisations, in her view, have the power 'to help develop, coordinate and implement solutions to pressing global challenges such as climate change, barriers to effective trade and gender inequalities' (The Commonwealth, 2019). She therefore argued that the London Declaration that brought together eight founding nations, over 70 years ago, had aimed to ensure that they would 'remain united as free and equal members of the Commonwealth of Nations, freely co-operating in the pursuit of peace, liberty and progress'. As she put it, 'the Commonwealth shines as a beacon of hope and promise' at a 'time when multilateralism is under threat' (Scotland, 2019). In a similar vein, Helen Clarke argued in September 2019 that multilateralism 'has been incredibly important for establishing women's rights' and remains critical for their achievement of equal status. In her view, current threats to it are 'deeply gendered', (International Peace Institute, 2019), usually coming from countries led by 'macho-type' (Lyons, 2019) leaders. According to Taylor and Baldwin (2019), such '[p]opulist, isolationist leaders' have tended to 'use misogynistic, xenophobic, and racist constructs in both public rhetoric and in policy' that is contributing to 'an international erosion of women's rights'.

In the current COVID-19 related crisis, the principles of multilateralism have become all the more essential to generate a new policy momentum that can address global health, economic and social problems. As Commonwealth Secretary-General Patricia Scotland put it, 'Multilateralism remains a powerful agent of positive change' (Scotland, 2019). Arguably the world now needs more women leaders and fellow travellers to champion, Multilateralism and international co-operation'.

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