

**United Nations Targets for Proportion of Women  
in Leadership and Decision-Making Positions**

**Overview of context for the United Nations (UN) targets:**

| Year | Activity  |
|------|---|
| 1972 | UN General Assembly proclaimed 1975 to be International Women's Year  |
| 1975 | <p>UN General Assembly endorsed the World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Women's Year, adopted by the World Conference of the International Women's Year at Mexico City in 1975.</p> <p>UN also proclaimed 1976-1985 the UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace.</p>  |
| 1980 | <p>UN General Assembly endorsed the Programme of Action for the second half of UN Decade for Women adopted by the "World Conference of the UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace" at Copenhagen in 1980.</p> <p>UN General Assembly adopted the International Development Strategy for the Third United Nations Development Decade and reaffirmed the recommendations of the Copenhagen World Conference.</p>  |
| 1985 | Third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi adopted the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to review and appraise the achievements of the UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace. The Forward-looking Strategies presented concrete measures to overcome the obstacles to the Decade's goals and objectives for the advancement of women.  |
| 1990 | <b><i>UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Resolution</i></b> in 1990 recommended targets for increasing the proportion of women in leadership positions: <b><i>30% by 1995 and 50% by 2000.</i></b>   |
| 1995 | <p>Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing reported little progress had been made in achieving the ECOSOC target of <b><i>30% women in positions at decision-making levels by 1995.</i></b></p> <p>Conference adopted the Platform for Action, which included strategic objective G.1: "Take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making". Proposed actions included Governments committing themselves to establishing the goal of gender balance in governmental bodies and committees, public administrative entities and the judiciary. UN to continue to monitor progress towards achieving the UN target of 50% women in managerial and decision-making positions by 2000.</p> |

## Relevant text of UN Economic and Social Council Resolution

### 1. Economic and Social Council Resolution,<sup>1</sup> E/RES/1990/15 (24 May 1990)

[Adopted recommendations and conclusions arising from the first review and appraisal of the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the year 2000 and urged governments to implement the recommendations.]

Recommendation VI: [2<sup>nd</sup> para] Governments, political parties, trade unions and professional and other representative groups should each aim at targets to increase the **proportion of women in leadership positions to at least 30% by 1995**, with a view to achieving **equal representation between women and men by the year 2000**, and should institute recruitment and training programmes to prepare women for those positions.<sup>2</sup>

## Additional information from other relevant documents

### 2. UN Commission on the Status of Women, 39<sup>th</sup> session (15 March-4 April 1995)

Report of the Secretary-General on the second review and appraisal of the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women:

“20. Existing research indicates a more encouraging trend. If women are represented in sufficiently large numbers in the decision-making arena (constituting what has been termed a "critical mass", estimated at a level of **at least 30-35% in decision-making bodies**), they have a visible impact on the style and content of political decisions. For example, in the Nordic countries, the only region where women have achieved a critical mass at the policy-making level, owing to pressure exerted by women, issues that have long been ignored, such as equal rights, women's control over their own bodies, child care and protection against sexual violence, have gradually been incorporated into public agendas and reflected in national budgets. Evidence for this has been documented in a number of United Nations studies and reports of the Secretary-General on the priority themes.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ECOSOC coordinates the work of 14 UN specialised agencies, 10 functional commissions and five regional commissions; receives reports from 11 UN funds and programmes; and issues policy recommendations to the UN system and to Member States. Under the UN Charter, ECOSOC is responsible for promoting higher standards of living, full employment, and economic and social progress; identifying solutions to international economic, social and health problems; facilitating international cultural and educational cooperation; and encouraging universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. ECOSOC's purview extends to over 70% of the human and financial resources of the entire UN system.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations (1996), *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women 1945–1996*.

<sup>3</sup> “Equality: Equality in political participation and decision-making” (E/CN.6/1990/2); “Peace: Equal participation in all efforts to promote international cooperation, peace and disarmament” (E.CN.6/1992/10); “Women in Politics and Decision-making in the Late Twentieth Century” (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.91.IV.3).

### 3. Fourth World Conference on Women (September 1995)

#### Conference diagnosis of status of women in power and decision-making:

- Despite widespread movement towards democratisation in most countries, women are largely underrepresented at most levels of government, especially in ministerial and other executive bodies.
- Little progress was made in attaining political power in legislative bodies or in achieving the target endorsed by the Economic and Social Council of having 30% women in positions at decision-making levels by 1995.

#### Platform for Action: Strategic objective G.1 – Take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making

##### Actions to be taken by governments:

- Commit themselves to establishing the goal of gender balance in governmental bodies and committees, as well as in public administrative entities, and in the judiciary, including, inter alia, setting specific targets and implementing measures to substantially increase the number of women with a view to achieving equal representation of women and men, if necessary through positive action, in all governmental and public administration positions.

##### Actions to be taken by UN:

- Continue to collect and disseminate quantitative and qualitative data on women and men in decision-making and analyse their differential impact on decision-making and monitor progress towards achieving the **Secretary-General's target of having women hold 50% of managerial and decision-making positions by the year 2000.**

### 4. Conceptual Basis of 30% Target

The following is extracted from Part Three of *The Long March to Beijing: the United Nations and the Women's Revolution*, an unpublished history of UN and the advancement of women covering the period 1945-1995.

#### Chapter Eight. Women and politics: defining the critical mass

- The **concept of critical mass was borrowed from nuclear physics** where it referred to the quantity of plutonium that needs to be brought together to produce a nuclear explosion. It had first been applied to gender in the mid-1970's by an American feminist scholar, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, who was studying women in business. She reviewed studies of the behaviour of minorities in task-oriented groups to find out the level of participation that was necessary for the minority members to function effectively as a group to press their interests. She estimated that **when the proportion of minority members reached about 30%, they were able to influence decision-making autonomously as a group.** At levels lower than that, effectiveness required the minority members to act more like those of the majority and, failing that, they would be ineffective and lonely dissenters.

- In the 1980's, these findings were picked up by the Danish feminist political scientist Drude Dahlerup, who argued that the critical mass phenomenon could apply to politics as well. In some countries in Scandinavia, critical mass levels were being approached as some levels of government and it was possible to see whether this made a difference. The findings made considerable sense: if a critical mass was not achieved, any gender differences that might exist would remain uninfluential in decision-making and the stereotype of "no difference" would remain confirmed.
- The inclusion of a numeric expression for the critical mass was pushed because of a belief that a quantifiable target that was based on an empirical premise would make it easier for women to advocate for changes in their own society and would make governments more accountable. The fact that the 30% level had been met in a number of countries in different regions indicated that it was realistic. The fact that it was backed by research showing that differences in policies would only be seen when it was reached gave it a special weight. A universal target would allow women's advocates to use comparative methods to push for governmental policies.

Equal Opportunities Commission  
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