Nationality versus Gender? The Administrative Politics of Gender Parity in the United Nations and the Implementation of SCR1325

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This article will shed light on an under-researched aspect of the implementation of gender policies in the UN Secretariat—the administrative and budgetary committees that establish the staff regulations for civilian personnel. The article will explore how the politics of UN recruitment invokes two primary identities—nationality and gender—and how these conflict with each other. Using demographic analysis of UN civilian staff in peace operations and a micro-case study of an ongoing attempt by the Secretary-General to change the staff rules and regulations to introduce a form of affirmative action to reach gender parity, this article finds that efforts to achieve the representative provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, including through gender parity of civilians in peace operations, are hampered by the primacy of national identity in international organizations as well as by the highly politicized and nation state driven process of administrative and budgetary decision-making. By focusing on the inner dynamics of decision-making in the United Nations, the article contributes to the literature on international organizations and gender by demonstrating how normative goals can be undermined by competition among member states over internal administrative processes arising from complex principal-agent relationships.

Introduction: The (Gender) Politics of Human Resources in the United Nations

The question of who works for international organizations has been considered from several perspectives within international relations. Most commonly, the number of staff employed, particularly at the higher level, has been understood in realist terms as a proxy for power and influence of member states (Novosad and Werker 2019). In the case of senior staff, political influence by member states has also been shown to have an impact on the process of selection, suggesting the prioritization of politics over competence in human resources (Oksamytina, Vincenzo, and Lundgren 2020). Constructivist approaches have focused on the agency of international bureaucracies and the role they play in establishing rules and influencing policies independently of member state interests (Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Xu and Weller 2008).

More recently, approaches from public administration have been applied to the staffing of international organizations applying ideas from representative bureaucracy to international organizations (Christensen and Yesalkgit 2019). Studies have explored how geographical representation is embedded in staffing policies in the European Union (EU) (Murdoch, Trondal, and Gys 2016) as well as the relationship between nationality and expertise (Trondal, Murdoch, and Gys 2015). Specifically, in relation to the United Nations, recent work has explored the determinants of national representation across the United Nations, including financial contribution and political power (Parizek 2017; Badache 2020). Most work on the composition of the bureaucracy in IOs has focused exclusively on national representation, largely as an effect of principal agent relations.

While “as wide a geographical basis as possible” is enshrined in the UN Charter, since 1985, the United Nations has also had targets for the number of women staff. Gender targets were originally set by the General Assembly in 1985 at 30 percent of professional posts “subject to geographical distribution” (United Nations 1985). The Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 established the goal of 50:50 gender balance in professional posts. The passage of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) in 2000 created further impetus for gender parity across the UN system. The WPS agenda has four interrelated strands: prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery (Kirby and Shepherd 2016). Representation of women in the United Nations’ peace operations has been a key component of the participation strand (Davies and True 2019). Given the historical underrepresentation of women in the United Nations—in particular in peace and security work—the goal of gender parity effectively translates into efforts to increase the representation of women. Normative Security Council resolutions such as 1325 are binding on member states (Tryggestad 2009). Implementation is inevitably variable and relies on an acceptance of their legitimacy by states (Swaine 2009). Requests by the Security Council to the Secretariat in contrast are the responsibility of the Secretary-General and therefore become internal management concerns.

The question therefore arises of why successive Secretaries-General have failed to achieve gender parity goals—specifically in peace and security? There are several factors in play including contextual issues relating to the military culture of peacekeeping and the lack of support and facilities for female staff (Karim and Beardsley 2016). Nevertheless, UN jobs—even in hardship contexts—are highly desirable and vacancies routinely receive hundreds of applications (Di Razza 2017). Many of the skills required in UN peace operations are not limited to diplomatic training and experience—such as administration, public information, or civil affairs—therefore, in theory, there is a large pool of women globally who may be qualified (Parvazian, Gill, and Chiera 2017).

An additional factor that has received less attention in the academic literature is constraints arising from administrative decision-making in the General Assembly’s main budget committee—the Fifth Committee. The Fifth Committee is a universal committee of all 193 member states. Negotiations about administrative and budgetary policies are largely driven by national interests and provide a site for smaller and less powerful countries to wield influence and push Davies, Hannah (2021) Nationality versus Gender? The Administrative Politics of Gender Parity in the United Nations and the Implementation of SCR1325. Global Studies Quarterly, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab013

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back, including through participation in groups and coalitions of like-minded states (Patz and Goetz 2019). Member state debates over staffing policies reveal fundamental political differences over key concerns of international public administration, including over the autonomy and agency of secretariats and, relatedly, what international civil servants should represent. (Bauer and Ege 2016; Parizek 2017).

The administrative and budgetary decision-making process is therefore fundamentally political; however, the complex and formulaic procedures are both tedious and opaque. Consequently, they have received very little scholarly attention.

Civilian staff working in UN peace operations—unlike military personnel—are employed directly by the UN Secretariat and are not provided by governments. Indeed, there are very clear administrative instructions limiting the use of seconded personnel as a possible source of “back-door” recruitment (United Nations 1999). Another distinctive feature of the UN Secretariat relative to other IOs is the level of scrutiny by all member states over its work programs and budgets (Patz and Goetz 2019). The political nature of administrative decision-making results in a highly complex and contested relationship between and among principals (states) and agents (the Secretariat) (Hawkins et al. 2006).

This article will use a detailed case study of Fifth Committee decision-making to explore what happens when the administration’s push for gender parity and the greater representation of women—informed by SCR1325—encounters administrative politics.

The article will first briefly present data on the gender and nationality of civilian staff in UN peacekeeping before offering an overview of the UN System-Wide Strategy on Gender Parity and how it invokes theories of representative bureaucracy. The article will conclude with a micro-case study of an unsuccessful attempt to change the staff to promote gender parity in the UN Secretariat.

Where Are the Women? Official Data on Nationality and Gender

The data below are drawn from an annual report on the Composition of the UN Secretariat (United Nations Secretary General 2019a). The report consolidates data on nationality and gender across the whole Secretariat and on gender at the department or entity level.

Gender

According to the United Nations, the staff is either male or female. As of December 31, 2018, the overall percentage of female staff in the UN Secretariat was 36.8 percent. In field offices—that is peacekeeping, political, and humanitarian operations—this figure was 23.1 percent. There are fifty-one entities categorized as field offices. This includes everything from the largest multidimensional peace operations with military and police components to panels of experts established by the Security Council consisting of no more than two staff. Only 20 of the 51 field offices have more than 100 staff.

Of these twenty, none has gender parity. The field office with the highest percentage of female staff (46 percent) is the UN Verification Mission in Colombia (UNFICOMP). The second is the UN mission in Cyprus (UNFICYP) with 42 percent and then the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) with 41 percent. All three are family duty stations allowing staff to bring their families to the mission area. At the other end, the UN Mission in Afghanistan has only 14 percent female staff, United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) in the Abyei region of Sudan has 16 percent, and United Nations-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) in the Darfur region of Sudan has 17 percent. These are all nonfamily duty stations and UNISFA is a military rather than a civilian-led mission. When filtering the data for “professional” staff only and excluding staff hired either on national contracts or to perform administrative functions, the percentage of women in most field offices is significantly higher and in the case of UNAMID reaches gender parity.

Nationality

Only twenty-five states have more than 1 percent of staff working in the Secretariat (1 percent equal to around 400 staff). The highest number of staff is from the United States with 2,505 nationals working in the Secretariat (6.57 percent). Of the ten countries that have the most staff in the Secretariat, five are from Africa and another two—Lebanon and Afghanistan—are developing countries. All the countries in the top ten, except for France, host UN Secretariat offices or operations and include significant numbers of local staff who are recruited nationally in the “general service” or national professional officer categories.

When it comes to internationally recruited professional staff, it is a very different picture (see table 1). Of the countries with the ten most professional staff in the Secretariat, only one is from a developing country—Kenya. The United States has the largest number of staff and is joined by the other four permanent members of the Security Council along with three major European financial contributors—Germany, Italy, and Spain, as well as Canada. Except for the Russian Federation, all the top ten countries with the most staff overall also have a larger percentage of female personnel.

These data highlight that there is a higher concentration of women from developed countries in the professional staff of the Secretariat. The ten countries that have the most female professional staff account for 58 percent of all female professional staff in the United Nations. These same countries account for only 21 percent of male professional staff. Women from the United States account for over 13 percent of all female professional staff. There is therefore considerably more national diversity among male employees. This imbalance is significant given the different priority member states give to geographical representation in the UN Secretariat and provides an important empirical basis for understanding the political challenges to gender parity in the UN Secretariat: the largest financial contributors to the United Nations who are most vocal about gender parity also have the largest number of female staff.

The UN System-Wide Strategy for Gender Parity, and Politics of Representative Bureaucracy in UN Human Resources Management

Upon taking office in 2017, Guterres made gender parity a priority. In October 2017, he launched the UN System-Wide Strategy on Gender Parity (the Strategy) (United Nations 2017). The Strategy, while an internal document, sent a powerful symbolic message. Cynically, some UN staff and diplomats commented that the fanfare about gender was a way of distracting from the fact that for many the ninth Secretary-General should have been a woman (Associated Press 2015).
Given historical underrepresentation, the goal of gender balance in the UN Secretariat has in practice resulted in efforts to employ more women. However, the focus on numerical targets in human resources has not confronted the ways in which the Secretariat is a gendered institution through internal cultures, practices, and dynamics (Bode 2020; Holmes et al. 2019). Underlining this point, gender parity targets have also focused only on the professional level, ignoring the feminized support categories where women have always been well represented. The focus on professional women—characteristic of liberal feminism (Kanter 1977)—also leaves undisturbed institutional practices and deep-seated power dynamics not only between men and women, but also among and between different nationalities, staffing categories, and ethnicities.

The argument for increasing the representation of women has drawn on claims about the legitimacy and responsiveness of the United Nations. As a public institution, the United Nations should provide a good example, particularly on work advancing the status of women (see, e.g., General Assembly resolution 50/164 of 1995). The Strategy reiterates these claims arguing that gender parity is critical to the United Nations’s credibility and further justifies women’s representation based on empowerment (United Nations 2017, 5).

The rationale for equal representation of women in the Strategy therefore also echoes theories of representative bureaucracy. Representative bureaucracy posits that employment of minority and under-represented groups—such as women—in a public administration is essential not only for its legitimacy but also as a form of equity (Peters, Maravic, and Schroeter 2015). In emphasizing “empowerment,” the Strategy draws on ideas in representative bureaucracy that suggest that conscious recruitment of minority and marginalized populations can also contribute to more peaceful and just societies through redistribution of public resources (Esman 1999).

A key distinction in the representative bureaucracy literature is between passive and active representation. Passive representation describes the presence of minority and/or marginalized groups in the administration. It has been argued that increasing passive representation can contribute to positive outcomes for that group, through for example the symbolic signal it sends. (Theobald and Haider-Markel 2009). Active representation considers the degree to which members of the minority/marginalized group pursue the interests of that group in their work (see, e.g., Mosher 1968; Meier and O’Toole 2002). Quantitative studies of public servants in national and municipal administrations have indicated that under certain conditions bureaucrats can and do “actively represent” their demographic group leading to positive outcomes (Meier 1993). However, other scholars have considered the degree to which such active representation can undermine coherence and legitimacy if bureaucrats’ actions are partial or discriminatory (Lim 2006).

While the focus of the 2017 Strategy is on measures to increase the passive representation of women in the Secretariat, it unambiguously makes an argument for the potential of active representation. Drawing on the WPS agenda, these arguments are most explicit in the United Nation’s work in peace operations. The introduction references The Global Study (UN Women 2015) with the claim that women’s “participation has a direct impact on the sustainability of peace (United Nations 2017, 5). The United Nation’s wider discourse on gender in peacekeeping also emphasizes active representation arguing that women in peacekeeping will inspire other women and girls (Keita 2018).

Active representation of women draws on ideas about “critical mass”—for women to be able to act for other women, there needs to be a significant number of women working in critical roles—around 30 percent (Keiser et al. 2002). In addition, the potential for active representation assumes that women will first identify as women. Second, based on that identification, there will be a “gender match” (Kennedy, Bishu, and Heckler 2020).

While a detailed analysis of gender in active representation scholarship is beyond the scope of this article, it should be noted that there are limits to both critical mass and gender-matching strategies for gender equality without attention to social and organizational processes that influence how public servants encounter both each other and their clients (Kennedy, Bishu, and Heckler 2020).

While the Strategy does have a chapter on the “Enabling Environment” and proposes measures to address some organizational and social aspects, it also makes the case for gender parity based on ideas about efficiency and greater performance. Accepting as a given the budgetary context of retrenchment and scarcity (“doing more with less”), gender parity is “increasingly necessary to the United Nations’s efficiency, impact and credibility. Greater diversity is directly correlated in both public and private sectors with significant gains in operational effectiveness.” (United Nations 2017, 5). The Strategy makes a “business case” for parity. For example, the Strategy talks about outsourcing aspects of the

### Table 1. UN top ten countries’ professional staff

| Country                  | Number of professional staff | Percentage of professional staff | Number of female professional staff | Percentage of female professional staff |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| United States            | 1,219                       | 9.58 percent                    | 629                                 | 13.46 percent                           |
| France                   | 770                         | 6.95 percent                    | 445                                 | 9.66 percent                            |
| UK                       | 629                         | 4.95 percent                    | 269                                 | 5.69 percent                            |
| Germany                  | 475                         | 3.73 percent                    | 252                                 | 5.47 percent                            |
| Canada                   | 492                         | 3.87 percent                    | 238                                 | 5.17 percent                            |
| Italy                    | 432                         | 3.40 percent                    | 218                                 | 4.73 percent                            |
| Spain                    | 394                         | 3.10 percent                    | 195                                 | 4.23 percent                            |
| China                    | 355                         | 2.78 percent                    | 179                                 | 3.89 percent                            |
| Russian Federation       | 346                         | 2.72 percent                    | 108                                 | 2.34 percent                            |
| Kenya                    | 297                         | 2.34 percent                    | 145                                 | 3.15 percent                            |
| Total                    | 5,407                       | 42.51 percent                   | 2,662                               | 57.78 percent                           |

Source: Composition of the UN Secretariat: staff demographics (United Nations A/74/82)
search function for senior women, moving away from the traditional process of member state nominations (United Nations 2017, 30). The effectiveness justification echoes the diversity management approach in representative bureaucracy, which replaces moral and political arguments for inclusion with an economic logic (Groeneweld and Van de Walle 2010). In this way, the business case for gender—at least discursively—aligns the goal with the interests of donor member states.

In summary, the rhetoric and rationale for gender parity presented in the Strategy challenge several strongly held member state positions and underlying assumptions in the General Assembly.

First, merit: according to Article 101, the primary consideration in employing staff to work in the UN Secretariat should be the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity. This provision conceives of the UN administration as an ideal Weberian civil service model (Hensell 2016). The Gender Parity Strategy confronts meritocratic assumptions and calls into question the effectiveness of existing processes approved by member states to recruit “the best and the brightest” (United Nations 2017, 8). For all member states, at least rhetorically, there is a firm commitment to merit, effectively a lowest common denominator attachment to Article 101 when nothing else can be agreed.

Second, impartiality: the UN Charter explicitly forbids civil servants from acting in the interests of and at the direction of outside parties (United Nations 1945, Article 100). Again, while in practice there is an accepted degree of hypocrisy about how this is interpreted, without a critical and reflective reevaluation of the United Nation’s processes and structures, exhorting “active representation” jars with the expectation of impartiality.

Third, geographical representation: the widely accepted principle that staff should be recruited from “as wide a geographical basis as possible” to ensure the United Nations is not overly dominated by one or two member states (Weiss 1982). Given historical underrepresentation particularly of developing countries, equitable geographical distribution has become a political demand. While the Strategy recognizes that gender parity should not be at the expense of geographical diversity, it makes no mention specifically of developing countries. Because of the complex and politically negotiated formula for measuring geographic underrepresentation (Parizek and Stephen 2020), some of the member states who are theoretically underrepresented include major donors like the United States and Japan. The Strategy specifically chides “While each entity should work to bring these two goals together, as highlighted by the Secretary-General geographic representation cannot be used as an excuse not to achieve gender parity” (United Nations 2017, 8).

Additionally, the Strategy is a unilateral initiative of the Secretary-General, proposing significant reforms including to the staff regulations and rules, approved by member states. For some states, the Strategy therefore also represents a challenge to the authority, the General Assembly.

To illuminate these tensions, the following section explains in more detail the process of General Assembly decision-making on administrative questions.

The Policy Framework: Because Process Matters

To change the staff regulations and rules, there must be agreement from member states in the General Assembly. As with other human resources reforms, proposals are put forward in reports by the Secretary-General, based on mandated requests from the General Assembly and/or his own reform proposals (see figure 1).

Before reports are introduced to the Fifth Committee, they are reviewed by an Advisory Committee (Advisory Committee for Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ)). The ACABQ consists of twenty-one members, nominally technical experts who undertake in-depth review of all administrative and budgetary matters (Singer 1961). However, the members of the ACABQ are appointed by the General Assembly on the “basis of broad geographical representation” (United Nations General Assembly 1946). The membership reflects the relative power of states and has consistently included representatives from the United States, Russian Federation, and China, as well as big financial contributors such as Germany and Japan. Discussions in the ACABQ are therefore also partisan with members strongly pursuing their national or regional interests. However, reports must be agreed upon by all twenty-one members. The need for consensus gives members with strongly held positions—such as the Russian Federation—significant influence. The ACABQ makes recommendations to the Fifth Committee in the form of written reports and is frequently the basis of the Fifth Committee’s decisions.

Several features of these committees are worth highlighting in the context of the political-administrative obstacles to gender parity and the WPS agenda more broadly.

Like most General Assembly committees, they are composed largely of career diplomats and have historically been male-dominated (Enloe 1990). The working practices and culture of the committees—including late-night negotiations and informal socializing—are characteristically “homosocial” (Sommerlad 2015).

In any one session of the Fifth Committee, there will also be multiple administrative and budgetary agenda items and issues to be resolved: everything is potentially part of a negotiation, even down to decisions over how many junior civil staff should be employed in a peace operation. Negotiations inevitably link seemingly unrelated issues to arrive at an “end game” that meets sufficient consensus among different parties and interests. Delegations’ positions can therefore shift over the course of negotiations as part of broader compromises (Zartman 1994). Given these constraints, big changes to administrative policies like the staff regulations and rules are very difficult.

Because of the range of issues under consideration and the lack of capacity of smaller states to follow all negotiations, the Fifth Committee, like other UN forums, operates a group system. These groups are effectively negotiating blocs (Stuenkel 2011) that loosely intersect with and overlap with the formal regional group system for UN elections. The process of group negotiation reinforces and emphasizes ideational cleavages among member states.

The largest group in numerical terms is the Group of 77 (G77), which includes 134 countries as well as China. The G77 had its origins in the 1960s when it was formed alongside the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964 to promote the interests of developing countries in the global economic system (Geldart and Lyon 1981). Holding together a coalition like the G77 can be very difficult and there are several items where they do not take a group position. However, greater representation of staff from developing countries has strong support—both symbolically and tactically—and is therefore an issue the Group can coalesce around.

1 These practices have been significantly reshaped by the Covid-19 pandemic with hearings and negotiations taking place virtually.
The second-largest negotiating group in the budget committees is the EU. Since the EU includes a significant number of the top financial contributors to the United Nations, the group tends to focus on administrative efficiency and management reform as key priorities, along with the United States and Japan. Although formally represented by staff from the European External Action Service (EEAS), positions are agreed among the twenty-seven members and joint positions can be also difficult for the group to achieve. The goal of gender equity is not only a foreign and domestic policy priority for many EU states, but it also aligns with an ideal version of European values that is useful for the EU’s self-image (Guerrina and Wright 2016). Further, the association of gender parity with diversity management and ideas about a more modern and efficient secretariat connects with many of the EU’s broader management goals.

Another significant player is the Russian Federation, which has a long-standing principled commitment to the authority of the General Assembly and control over the Secretariat (Emerson and Claude 1952). Both the Russian Federation and the G77 share a certain distrust of the Secretariat believing that it is dominated by the interests of the major financial contributors. Fifth negotiations frequently split between developed and developing with the Russian Federation and China somewhere in between: the G77 pursue more spending on the United Nation’s development activities and greater intergovernmental influence over the Secretariat; the EU, the United States, Japan, and other western countries, which—with China—pay the major share of the UN budget, prioritize efficiency, improved performance, and modernized, streamlined management techniques (Geri 2001).

Implementing Gender Parity: Changes to the UN Staff Rules and Regulations

The following section uses data from a detailed case study of decision-making about human resources policy in the United Nations between 2016 and 2020. The case focuses on the Fifth Committee as “an extreme case” (Gerring 2006) of contested bureaucratic autonomy in international organizations and political oversight of staffing (Bauer and Ege 2016). The case study is part of a research project looking at who works for UN peace operations and what they represent. As a method, the case study can offer insights into the actions, intentions, and reasoning of actors in a specific institutional setting as well as a means to describe and identify both problems and their causes (George and Bennett 2005).

The case study is one element of a mixed-methods research design that is sequential and explanatory (Cresswell and Plano Clark 2018), linking data about who works for UN peace operations with decision-making about the human resources policies. Within the Fifth Committee, the human resources agenda item in the UN Assembly is particularly significant because of the lack of agreement: what is it about this issue that is most controversial and difficult? What does the lack of consensus reveal about different perspectives on staffing? And does disagreement among states have any impact on the representation of women within UN peacekeeping?

Data for the case study were drawn from official documents, formal rules of procedure, statements from member states in the Fifth Committee, and twenty-four interviews with UN staff and diplomats undertaken between September 2019 and September 2020.

The micro-case study presented below traces how the Secretary-General attempted to revise the staff regulations and rules to explicitly include gender parity in recruitment decisions. Based on data that reveal women from developed countries are “overrepresented” in the UN Secretariat, the tension between gender and geography is offered as one reason for this failure, with gender being instrumentalized by groups of member states as a means of pursuing other policy goals on internal management. This tension is further exacerbated by different views on the authority of the Secretary-General to implement changes independently of member states. This micro case provides a detailed breakdown of the process (see table 2 for summary) and illustrates two key dimensions of conflict among states over, first, what staff should represent, and second, who decides—thereby revealing the complexity of principal relationships on administrative decision-making in the UN Secretariat (Patz and Goetz 2019).

1. Operationalizing the UN System-Wide Gender Parity Strategy

While most of the actions in the Secretary-General’s 2017 Gender Parity Strategy are internal to UN organizations, the recommendations for field operations to introduce a series of temporary “special measures” to “accelerate de facto equality between men and women” required changes to recruitment so that women candidates—if meeting all other requirements—should be automatically selected for vacant posts (United Nations 2017, 21). When the Strategy was launched, several large UN peace operations were either closing or facing considerable reduction in personnel—including the missions in Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Darfur. With the potential loss of more female civilian staff, it was feared that the targets for gender parity in field operations would be harder to reach. To make these changes, and in keeping with established practice, the Secretary-General formally presented revisions to the staff regulations and rules to the budget committees.

2. First report of the Secretary-General (A/73/378)

In September 2018, however, another report by the Secretary-General on changes to staff regulations and rules had been issued (United Nations General Assembly 2018). The purpose of the report was to simplify and streamline the regulations and rules to align them with the new management paradigm approved by the General Assembly in 2017. This report did not propose any changes to explicitly address gender parity and was part of the implementation of a wider management reform process.
The report was presented to the ACABQ in November 2018. The ACABQ’s report on the Secretary-General’s proposals was very critical including about minor editorial changes to use gender-neutral language, and effectively demanded the Secretary-General to rewrite the report to clarify the differences between editorial changes and those based on General Assembly decisions (United Nations 2018).

3. Second report of the Secretary-General (A/73/378/Add1)

In February 2019, the Secretary-General published a separate report proposing revised staff regulations and rules to explicitly include gender balance in hiring decisions (United Nations Secretary General 2019b). Unlike the previous report, this one arose from the need to operationalize the proposals in the Secretary-General’s Gender Strategy to introduce “special measures” under his own authority, rather than from a request by the General Assembly (A/73/378).

The report highlighted that despite the Gender Parity Strategy the representation of women in field operations had not significantly improved since 2017. The report proposed that the Staff Regulations and Rules be amended to include the equitable distribution of the positions between men and women among the criteria to be considered in the context of both staff selection and retention. Given the planned downsizing of missions in 2019, the Secretary-General requested that the Assembly “consider these amendments as a matter of priority, as downsizing in the current context will slow the rate of change further in the best-case scenario, and numbers will decline in the worst case.” (United Nations Secretary General 2019b, para. 4)

The preparation of this report was led by the Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG) rather than by the Office of Human Resources, which usually leads on reports for the budget committee on staffing matters. The high-level involvement of the EOSG signaled that the issue was a high political priority that urgently needed addressing. The preparation of this report—while it signaled the Secretary-General’s determination—was hurried and lacked compelling data on the downsizing of peace operations. There was also a lack of coordination among the departments involved in producing the information.

4. Back in the ACABQ

The Secretary-General’s second report was presented to the ACABQ at the end of February 2019 by senior staff from Guterres’ team. The report received a difficult hearing in the ACABQ. While mission downsizing was used as a justification for the urgency of the issue, criticism was raised over the lack of detail on downsizing missions and analysis of the broader impact of this process. There were also questions about the timing and urgency of the report. The whole idea of gender equality and mainstreaming was challenged as contradicting the Charter. Some members criticized the process asking why this was being presented as a stand-alone report separate from other relevant human resources reforms, including on equitable geographical distribution. After the hearing, there were multiple requests for further written information, but the ACABQ did not produce any recommendations once it knew the report would not be taken up by the Fifth Committee (see below).
5. Proposed introduction to the Fifth Committee

The introduction of the Secretary-General’s second report was scheduled for March 2019 in conjunction with the ACABQ report, if finalized. However, at the first meeting of the Fifth Committee, there was resistance to even considering the issue. The G77 argued that the issue must be considered holistically with other human resources questions including geographical representation (G77 and China statement 2019).

At the end of this meeting, the Australian Chair of the Fifth Committee stated that she would discuss with her vice-chairs in the Committee Bureau, representing all regional groups. (United Nations General Assembly 2019). The Bureau decided to remove the report on the staff regulations and rules from the program of work. This signaled clearly to the ACABQ that proposals on gender parity were not a priority for the General Assembly. The second report focusing on gender parity in the recruitment process “disappeared” from the program of work of the Fifth Committee, and the ACABQ abandoned its own report.

6. Third time lucky: another report of the Secretary-General (A/74/289)

A third report of the Secretary-General on amendments to the staff regulations and rules was issued in August 2019 (United Nations Secretary General 2019c) consolidating previously proposed changes. The introduction to this report outlined the somewhat convoluted background explaining that while the two previous reports were not withdrawn, this third report contained all the changes but should be considered in conjunction with earlier reports. This third report further complicated the process; which changes were member states being asked to act on? Given that this was already a contentious issue, the confusion and lack of clarity gave further reason for objections on procedural grounds.

7. Pushback from the Fifth Committee

When the draft program of work was introduced to the Fifth Committee in October 2019, delegations gave statements outlining their priorities and positions. For the G77 and China, while it supported gender balance, this could not be at the expense of equitable geographical representation:

“Another key priority for the Group is Human Resources Management. The Group looks forward to carefully examining the proposals and reports related to this agenda item… We regret that, since our last deliberations on this item, and despite repeated requests by our Group to take appropriate measures towards attaining the goal of equitable geographical representation in the United Nations Secretariat, no comprehensive proposals to this end are being presented.” (G77 and China 2019)

The EU—the key supporter of gender parity—stressed that the program budget would be its priority: “Our main priority for this session should be the timely conclusion of negotiations on the proposed programme-budget for 2020. We need to use the limited committee time wisely and effectively. Duplication between items has to be avoided.” (European Union 2019).

The statements signaled both to the Secretariat and to the ACABQ that human resources and gender parity were not priorities for the two biggest groups in the General Assembly. The reports on the staff regulations and rules were once again removed and all human resources reports were deferred until March 2020.

8. ACABQ again

In the meantime, the ACABQ had its first hearing on the consolidated report in November 2020. The third report had a troubled reception leading to some very heated exchanges with the Secretariat. On the specific proposals on gender parity, members of the committee raised both procedural and normative objections. Normatively, some questioned why the Secretary-General had used selective General Assembly resolutions to justify the proposal to include gender parity rather than Article 8 of the UN Charter. Other members objected to the proposals because they would lead to discrimination against men and therefore contravene Article 8 and the existing staff regulations. When the ACABQ report was finally issued on March 3, 2020, it was once again very critical of the lack of clarity in the presentation and legislative basis for the changes (United Nations 2020a). The ACABQ also noted that it had raised these concerns with the Secretariat, but they had been ignored.

Specifically, on gender parity, the ACABQ’s report challenged the normative justification given by the Secretary-General:

“… the proposed addition of the “principle of equitable distribution of the positions between men and women” appears to be contradictory to and may cause misunderstanding of what is currently contained in regulation 4.3, where it is specified that “in accordance with the principles of the Charter, selection of staff members shall be made without distinction as to race, sex or religion” (United Nations 2020a)

The report again questioned the priority of gender parity given ongoing concerns about geographical distribution. Referring to the report on the Composition of the Secretariat (United Nations Secretary General 2019a), the ACABQ pointed out that more women from developed countries were appointed to posts subject to geographical distribution, and in this context it recommended that: “the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to develop a strategy with concrete measures and related actions to achieve equitable geographical representation . . . and to submit information on the progress made to the Assembly” (United Nations 2020a).

Given these criticisms and the lack of agreement, the ACABQ concluded that the question of gender parity would significantly alter current staff selection criteria and would have financial implications. The ACABQ could not agree on any recommendations and it was, therefore, a policy issue for the Fifth Committee.

9. Finally, the Fifth Committee

On March 4, 2020, reports under Human Resources Management agenda item were introduced to the Fifth Committee. Once again member states signaled their priorities and interests.

The EU expressed strong support for gender parity announcing:

“In January 2020, the Secretary-General announced that parity between men and women had been achieved at the senior level of the UN Secretariat and we thank him for his continued engagement in this area. This development should continue us to continue to strive for parity between men and women across the organization including field
missions where the differences remain particularly marked.” (European Union 2020)

However, the United States remained silent on the issue of gender parity and focused its statement on performance management and modernizing the workforce. While the G77 has always formally supported gender balance, it also explicitly called on the Secretary-General to focus on the recruitment of staff from different countries. In its statement, the Group suggested that there should be a similarly dedicated approach to reach geographical balance as there had been with gender.

“The Group notes the efforts of the Secretary General to improve the geographical representation, but also notices with concern an increase in the number of the unrepresented countries, amounting to 21, as well as the 40 underrepresented countries. The group believes that a more well-balanced geographical distribution is paramount. We also believe that the Secretary-General could use tools similar to those he has been using to address the question of gender balance to tackle imbalanced geographical representation.” (G77 and China 2020, author emphasis)

The Russian Federation openly opposed gender parity and “new artificial barriers to the selection of candidates” stating that “Rejected qualified male candidates for hiring or promotion in the interests of gender parity would be a violation of the Charter of the United Nations and Assembly resolution on human resource management” (United Nations 2020b).

By March 20, 2020, when the specific reports on the staff regulations were introduced, the Fifth Committee had moved online due to Covid-19. Statements were no longer made in a formal meeting but published on the website, giving less visibility, and making it harder for groups to consult among themselves. The G77 and China once again paired gender parity with equitable geographical representation stressing the two forms of representation must be treated equally. The EU expressed their support for gender parity and the proposed changes.

Although the G77 had prioritized geography, their proposal for a comparable “geography strategy” hinted that they might agree to the Secretary-General’s proposals on gender if they could get a firm commitment on geography. Even so, strong opposition from the Russian Federation would have made any compromise difficult and it is unlikely that the EU and the United States would have agreed to more micro-management of recruitment. In any case, partly because of the pandemic, negotiations never took place. The reports on the staff regulations and rules were deferred—once again—until the first resumed session in March 2021. While the Committee considered the reports in March 2021, there was no resolution, and the issue was again deferred (United Nations 2021).

Into the Weeds: Why the Budget Process Matters

The case study offered above is of interest for two reasons. From a policy perspective, it offers a detailed empirical account of how reform proposals in IOs—in this case, human resources in the UN Secretariat—are subject to complex political negotiations that reveal more nuanced relationships between and among principals than accounts based on financial and political interests might suggest (Eckhard, Patz, and Schmidt 2019).

Second, for supporters of gender parity and the WPS agenda more broadly, it also offers some tactical insight into how normative goals can be thwarted or supported through administrative and budgetary processes that give material effect to agreed resolutions of member states (Weinlich 2014). As an example of what this means in practice in the context of the WPS agenda, the office of the UN System-Wide Victims Rights Advocate—a key component of the United Nations Comprehensive Strategy on Assistance and Support to Victims of Sexual Exploitation—approved and welcomed by the Security Council and the General Assembly has never been funded beyond four full-time posts in the regular budget (United Nations 2017).

The following offers some possible tactical lessons that could be applied to other UN management reform proposals: first, the process of trying to change the policy could have been more skillfully managed by the Secretariat. The overlapping reports and lack of coherence point to poor strategy by senior management. While in some ways the involvement of the Office of the Secretary-General was a strength in terms of giving high priority to the issue of gender parity, it also led to coordination problems between the management departments working on the technical details and the political imperatives of the Secretary-General’s Office.

Given the opposition to the proposed changes—including internally from staff unions—more thought could have been given to the procedural aspects of decision-making. For example, the proposed changes might have been linked to a time-bound item related to peacekeeping budgets or an issue of strategic importance to G77 countries, such as troop reimbursement, to try and force a decision. Nevertheless, even with a more strategic approach to managing the budget committees, it is unlikely the Secretary-General would have been able to overcome more fundamental obstacles highlighted in this article.

One such obstacle is different views on the authority of the Secretary-General: the precise proposals regarding gender parity arose from the Gender Strategy, which was his initiative not requested or approved by any intergovernmental process. Where western states (the United States, EU) welcome the Secretary-General’s authority to initiate changes, others—notably the Russian Federation—challenge any action beyond implementing mandates agreed through the intergovernmental process. As a former Russian ambassador Sergei Lavrov memorably told the Secretary-General in a Fifth Committee debate on his proposed smoking ban—you do not own the building (CNN 2003).

From a policy perspective, Western countries—particularly anglophone ones—have historically been over-represented, going back to the very origins of the UN civil service (Weiss 1982). Not only are there more staff from western countries, but big contributors also use voluntary contributions to set priorities (Graham 2015). This is not just a question of money, but also different ideologies of management. In the last ten years, the United Nations has implemented various administrative innovations that originated in the management practices of western countries including greater use of outsourcing, streamlining back-office functions, flexible workspace, and enterprise resource planning, none of which have been particularly popular or effective.

The association of gender parity with the interests and management priorities of western donor countries might also contribute to the resistance of other states—as well as staff. Funding for gender issues and WPS-related work largely comes from extra-budgetary funding (UN Women 2015). Mainstreaming of women’s interests into the UN regular budget would require a defense and extension of
assessed funding. Some of the biggest state supporters of WPS in the Security Council are committed to reducing assessed budgets and prefer to use voluntary contributions outside of the oversight and accountability of the General Assembly (Graham 2015).

In this way, the increased representation of women is frequently—although misleadingly2—associated with the priorities of developed countries in contrast to the G77 priority of equitable geographical representation. As one western diplomat explained, “I mean, the UN is light years behind on this—anything that has to do with you know like same sex partners, to gender parity, to anything like that—we’re not going anywhere. While at the same time, you have of course this issue of geographic distribution—that is put against everything.”

**Conclusion**

While the failure of this Secretary-General to change the staff regulations and rules to promote gender parity highlights the limits of bureaucratic autonomy, even on internal staffing questions (Bauer and Ege 2016), the formal rules are not the only—or indeed the major—obstacle to increasing the representation and participation of women. In interviews with the UN staff at both the field and headquarters, several respondents expressed skepticism about the Secretary-General’s approach to gender parity because of its focus on formal processes and numbers. Echoing insights from feminist institutionalists (Mackay and Rhodes 2013; Holmes et al. 2019), interviewees pointed to other measures that could be used to support women, such as changes to the competency-based interviewing framework and challenging persistent cultural obstacles that remain unchanged by the focus on numerical representation (Bode 2020).

UN staffing is a deeply contested policy domain. Greater understanding of the processes and dynamics of member state bodies like the Fifth Committee is therefore crucial for generating policy recommendations on the administrative governance of international organizations (Patz and Goetz 2019). For member states, the salient primary identity running through the hierarchy of staff policies from the Charter through to the staff regulations and rules is nationality. For the G77—the largest grouping of states—the demand for “equitable geographical representation” is both a rallying cry and a policy goal. While there are strong member state advocates for gender equality in the UN system, this interest has not yet translated meaningfully into consensus-based General Assembly administrative negotiations. Rather the most forceful advocates of gender issues—such as Canada, Norway, and Germany—tend to use targeted voluntary contributions, such as the Elsie Initiative outside of the regular budget process or indeed even the UN Secretariat (Ghittoni, Lehouck, and Watson 2018).

Since both developing countries and women have been historically underrepresented, the tension between gender and nationality highlights the friction between different dimensions of staff representativeness in the United Nations. Recognizing this tension, further research on staff representation in international organizations could move beyond a narrow focus on nationality to consider the intersectionality of demographic categories and explore the potential impact on the legitimacy of the United Nations of the underrepresentation of a wider range of groups.

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2 Developing countries, notably Namibia, have played a key role in the development and advancement of the WPS agenda.

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