



UNGA Side Event

Securing Gains and Resisting Backlash:
Responding to the *Urgent Needs* of Women and
Feminist Political Leaders

24 September, 2024



Colmena fund
for Women's Political Power



The Colmena Fund (formerly the Women’s Political Leadership Fund), in collaboration with Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA), UN Women, and the Open Society Foundations (OSF), co-organized the event titled *Securing Gains and Resisting Backlash: Responding to the Urgent Needs of Women and Feminist Political Leaders*.

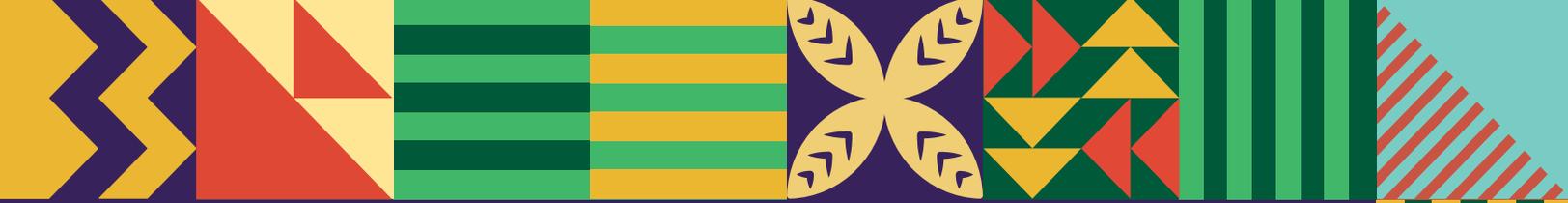
This event was held on 24 September in New York alongside the UNGA High-Level Week and the Summit of the Future. The discussions focused on three key areas to promote women’s political participation:

1. Reflecting on the progress, stagnation, or reversal from this mega election year and its significance for women's political leadership
2. Sharing emerging global trends and insights from women’s political leaders, and those most historically marginalized
3. Identifying actions to take moving forward to secure gains and resist backlash.

The meeting began with opening remarks by **Ms. Latanya Mapp**, CEO of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, followed by a welcome address from **Ms. Suyen Barahona**, Executive Director of the Colmena Fund. **Ms. Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda**, Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, then delivered the keynote speech.

Ms. Saskia Brechenmacher, Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, presented findings from a recent analysis commissioned by the Colmena Fund, which reviewed the significance of this “super election year” for women’s political leadership in terms of both gains and setbacks. Following her presentation, a panel discussion took place, featuring distinguished leaders **Ms. Epsy Campbell Barr** (Former Vice-President, Costa Rica), **Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka** (Former Deputy President of South Africa; Former Executive Director, UN Women), **Ms. Teresa Mojica Morga** (President of the Afromexican Foundation Petro Morga; Former Member of Congress, Mexico), **Ms. Hibaaq Osman** (Founder and CEO, Karama Network) and **Ms. Kunthida Rungruengkiat** (Director, Progressive Movement Foundation; Former Member of Parliament, Thailand). The panel discussion was moderated by **Ms. Stephanie Beasley**, Senior Writer at *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*.

The meeting concluded with closing remarks by **Mr. Brian Kagoro**, Managing Director of Programs at the Open Society Foundations.



Opening remarks

Ms. Latanya Mapp, CEO of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, stressed the importance of not only placing women in leadership roles but also ensuring they receive the protection and support needed to succeed. She highlighted the significance of providing resources beyond just financial support, calling for global solidarity and backing for women leaders across regions such as the U.S., Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia. Ms. Mapp pointed out that while \$84 trillion is expected to be transferred between generations, only 15% of that goes toward philanthropic causes, and a mere 2% reaches grassroots women's organizations and climate initiatives. She called for a redirection of resources to these critical areas, especially in light of urgent global challenges like climate change. She emphasized that increasing women's leadership is key to shifting this dynamic and urged collective action to meet future goals.



It's not just about getting women into leadership; it's about ensuring they have the protection and support to thrive."

—Ms. Latanya Mapp

Ms. Suyen Barahona, Executive Director of the Colmena Fund, expressed her excitement for the event and thanked co-hosts, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA), Open Society Foundations, UN Women and young women partners for their support. The fund has been renamed the "Colmena Fund for Women's Political Power," symbolizing collaboration and the strength of women's political communities. The fund is focused on empowering women in formal political spaces, particularly in the Global South, and aims to support marginalized groups, including racialized women, people with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, and LGBTIQ+ individuals. Ms. Barahona emphasized the fund's mission to break down barriers for women and mobilize philanthropic support, offering funding and expertise to strengthen organizations that ensure women leaders' security and protection. She announced the first learning grant cohort, totaling 2\$ million, which will support various projects, such as combating gender-based political violence and nurturing young women political leaders in countries like Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Thailand, Senegal, and South Africa. In closing, Ms. Barahona called for partnerships to advance bold initiatives and urged collective action to support women's leadership worldwide.



Advancing women's political leadership is not just about gender equity; it's about strengthening democracy itself. When women, especially those from marginalized communities, have a seat at the table, they bring new perspectives and drive transformative change that benefits all of society."

—Ms. Suyen Barahona

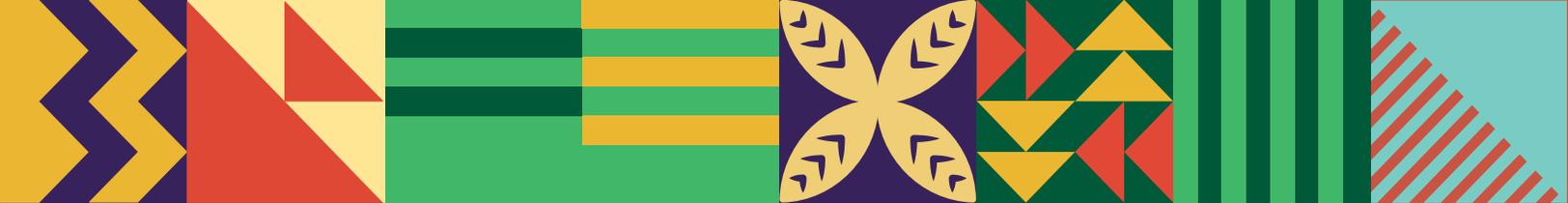
Ms. Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, highlighted the long-standing struggle for women's political representation. She acknowledged key milestones such as the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, the Beijing Declaration in 1995, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). She celebrated the achievements of women who have stood for elections and those who have voted for them, emphasizing the importance of voting to advance women's representation in public office. However, she also raised concerns about the violence women face

when running for office, particularly online harassment. Ms. Gumbonzvanda condemned how women's bodies and personal lives often become the focus of political attacks, unlike men. She called for collective action to reject such tactics and ensure women's participation is not hindered by their gender or identity. She concluded by stressing the need to revitalize global platforms like the Commission on the Status of Women to hold decision-makers accountable and continue advancing women's rights. She urged everyone to engage in daily political action, as life itself is inherently political.



Women's bodies have become the battleground of politics, but we must reject this violence and ensure women can participate without being defined by their gender or identity."

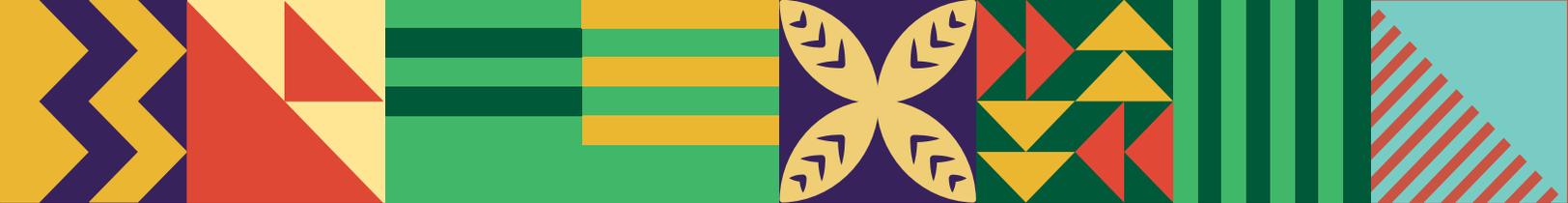
—Ms. Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda



Presentation on *Research Findings*

Ms. Saskia Brechenmacher, Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, provided an overview of the 2024 global election landscape.

- Elections are taking place in 73 countries in 2024.
- An analysis of elections held between January and July 2024 reveals setbacks in women's representation in 19 out of 29 countries with legislative elections, including India, Pakistan, and North Macedonia. However, progress was made in nine countries, such as Dominican Republic, Mongolia and the UK, where gender quotas and constitutional frameworks have helped bring more women into office.
- 18 countries have held presidential elections, with women running as candidates in half of them. However, only three countries have elected women as presidents-- Mexico, Iceland, and North Macedonia.
- A key success factor has been gender-inclusive legal frameworks. Mexico, for instance, saw success in electing its first female president and increasing women's representation across all levels of governance, thanks to its constitutionally mandated gender parity. Senegal with legislated quota and South Africa with voluntary party quotas were also noted as examples of success due to their strong gender parity rules. In contrast, countries without such frameworks saw limited gains for women.
- These legal frameworks were the result of years of mobilization by women's activists, often in collaboration with civil society and politicians. This highlights the crucial need for sustained and strengthened global efforts to support these initiatives.



Panel Discussion

Ms. Stephanie Beasley, Senior Writer at *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* moderated a panel discussion on women's political leadership during a critical election year, examining progress, challenges, and strategies to secure gains with Ms. Kunthida Rungruengkiat (Director, Progressive Movement Foundation; Former Member of Parliament, Thailand), Ms. Epsy Campbell Barr (Former Vice-President, Costa Rica), Ms. Teresa Mojica Morgia (President of the Afromexican Foundation Petro Morgia; Former Member of Congress, Mexico), Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka (Former Deputy President of South Africa; Former Executive Director, UN Women), and Ms. Hibaaq Osman (Founder and CEO, Karama Network).

Summary

The panelists reflected on the mixed outcomes of 2024 elections, noting both momentum and setbacks for women leaders. Despite advancements in some regions, systemic barriers remain, particularly in patriarchal political structures, leading to stagnation or reversals in women's representation in several countries. Emerging global trends highlight how marginalized

women—such as those from Indigenous or minority groups—face unique obstacles, limiting their political participation. Nevertheless, the importance of solidarity and support from civil society groups, political parties, and grassroots movements was emphasized as a key driver in creating opportunities for these women. Panelists stressed that the fight for women's political empowerment must also intersect with broader struggles, such as racial equality, environmental justice, and democracy.

The panel concurred that women's political leadership remains vulnerable to backsliding, and without continued efforts to address the structural barriers and systemic biases that women face, progress will remain fragile. To secure hard-won gains and resist backlash, panelists underscored the necessity of strong legal frameworks, including gender quotas and policies that ensure competitive opportunities for women candidates. Additionally, the need for continuous support to support entry and retention of women in political offices, protection from political violence, and nurturing of future women leaders, especially those from marginalized community, was highlighted. The discussion focused on the following issues.

Impact of Quotas for the Advancement of Women's Political Participation

Panelists emphasized that gender quotas help overcome institutional biases that often marginalize women in politics. Without such measures, women are often relegated to non-competitive electoral districts, limiting their chances of election. In Mexico, the quota system ensures women are not only included but given genuine opportunities to win key political offices.

However, quotas alone are not a panacea. The panelists acknowledged that while quotas increase women's representation, they do not necessarily translate into empowerment or influence. Women elected under quota systems still face discrimination within political parties and may lack the resources needed to enact change. To ensure lasting impact, the panelists called for additional

reforms, including campaign financing, mentorship programs, and inclusive party structures, alongside gender quotas, to truly transform political systems and empower women leaders.



We cannot just celebrate gender quotas; it's critical that women are placed in competitive districts. Otherwise, parity becomes a weak affirmative action, rather than real progress."

—Ms. Teresa Mojica Morga

Reforms in *Political Parties* and *Power Structures*

The panelists highlighted that internal dynamics within political parties, typically dominated by men, remain a significant barrier to advancing women's leadership. Even in countries with gender quotas or constitutional guarantees for women's representation, women struggle to rise to leadership positions due to entrenched party practices. Reforming political parties is crucial to ensure that women not only enter politics but also thrive once there.

One major issue discussed was the practice of placing women in non-competitive electoral districts, a form of "tokenism" that undermines the effectiveness of gender quotas. This tactic ensures women lose elections, offering only superficial inclusivity. The panelists called for placing women in competitive races and providing them with essential resources like campaign financing and mentorship to enhance their chances of success.

Additionally, the lack of women in leadership roles within parties further limits their ability to influence policy decisions. Despite being present in parliament or local government, women are often excluded from decision-making processes. To address this, the panelists advocated for promoting more women to senior leadership roles.

Building coalitions and support networks within political parties is also essential. The panelists emphasized the need for solidarity among women and the creation of mentorship programs to help them navigate political party dynamics and succeed in leadership roles.

Combatting Violence against Women in Politics

The panel discussion highlighted the persistent challenge of political violence targeting women in leadership, noting how political violence, harassment, and discrimination disproportionately affect women. This violence is often gender based, focusing on personal lives, appearance, or sexuality, and includes both physical threats and online harassment. Such attacks create significant barriers for women, making it difficult for them to enter or sustain political careers. The violence that happens in online spaces, is equally damaging, often discouraging women from participating in politics or leaving their positions early.

Panelists stressed that political violence against women is a systemic issue that undermines democracy, as it sends the message that women do not belong in leadership. To combat this, they called for stronger legal protections, such as those implemented in Kenya, and support networks for women in politics. They also emphasized the need for a cultural shift in politics, fostering inclusive environments where women can share experiences, support one another, and resist political violence.



We must ensure that women who step forward to lead are protected from the violence and harassment that aim to silence them. Legal protections are essential, but we also need strong support networks to give women the strength to continue in their political careers."

—Ms. Hibaaq Osman

Importance of *Civil Society* and *Support Networks*

Panelists discussed how CSOs provide vital support, especially for women from marginalized communities who often lack the financial resources and political connections needed to succeed in politics. One of the key contributions of CSOs is their ability to collect and disseminate data and information, which has been instrumental in advocating for gender-inclusive policies. CSOs also offer practical support, such as campaign training and fundraising, enabling women to navigate the political landscape. Solidarity networks are another essential function of CSOs, providing spaces where women politicians can share their experiences and support one another. These networks help women strategize on how to overcome barriers and collaborate with CSOs to push for policy changes benefiting women and marginalized communities.

However, the panelists highlighted the challenges faced by underfunded CSOs. Global donors have increasingly shifted focus away from grassroots organizations, making it harder for them to continue their work. The panel called for renewed investment in CSOs, particularly those focusing on gender equality, and emphasized the need for partnerships between CSOs and political parties to ensure sustained support for women in politics.



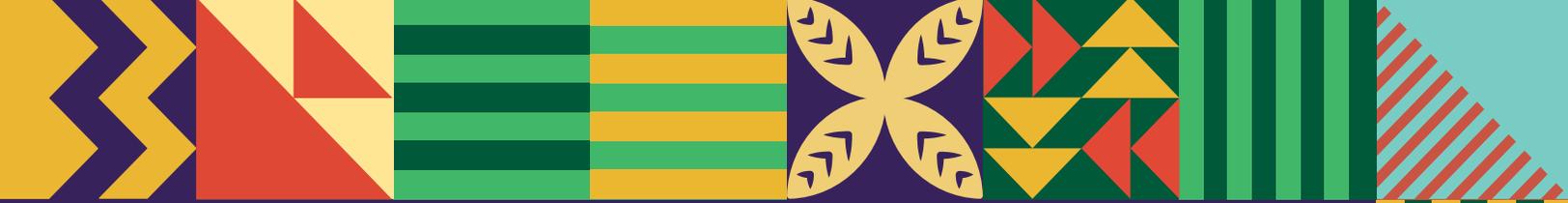
Civil society organizations played a critical role in providing data, support, and building narratives that highlight the importance of women's participation in politics.”

—Ms. Kunthida Rungruengkiat

Intersectionality and Inclusive Leadership

Panelists emphasized that promoting women's political leadership must go beyond increasing the number of women in office and must ensure that women from diverse backgrounds—such as racial minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, and women with disabilities—are represented and empowered to lead. Intersectional leadership means addressing multiple, overlapping forms of oppression and advancing justice for all marginalized groups.

The panelists noted that not all women in politics advance feminist or social justice agendas. It is crucial to support women who are committed to intersectional leadership, focusing not only on gender equality but also on racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights, and other social justice issues.



Closing and key *takeaways*

To conclude the event, Mr. Brian Kagoro, Managing Director of Programs at the Open Society Foundations highlighted four key insights from the panel discussion.

First, ecosystems and communities of transformation are critical for enabling legislative policies, providing resources, and offering technical support. Second, the importance of intersectional organizing and mobilizing across movements was emphasized. The speaker noted that those working for progressive causes must remain vigilant, as opponents often hijack momentum to reinterpret or block progress. Third, the platform for women's empowerment should

prioritize women from disadvantaged and excluded backgrounds, including those from the Global South, rural areas, disabled women, and diverse sexual identities. The movement must focus on investing in skills that support resource generation, knowledge distribution, and cultural diversity. Lastly, the speaker stressed the importance of being prepared for opposition from those threatened by progress. He encouraged a collective approach that operates both in celebration and readiness for challenges, emphasizing the need for resource mobilization, knowledge generation, and solidarity to sustain political futures for women in all their diversity.



The fight for this noble cause will always face resistance from those who feel threatened by it, but while they fight back, we must stay focused on building ecosystems that support legislative policy, technical resources, and solidarity”

—Ms. Teresa Mojica Morga



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