2017 was a moment for change for women around the world—and at the United Nations. For the first time, similar numbers of men and women serve in the top echelons of senior management, including among Resident Coordinators—the highest UN officials and the chiefs of UN teams in countries. And the UN Secretary-General’s System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity, developed with extensive support by UN Women, came online as a roadmap for parity in every other level and entity in the UN system. Next up as a priority: parity amongst Special Representatives and Envoys.

Eighteen years beyond an original target date for parity, it’s past time for the United Nations to “walk the talk.” The strategy provides recommended actions and clear targets, such as to significantly increase the number of women peacekeepers (only 4 per cent are women right now), and institute more family-friendly policies. It calls on civil society organizations to hold the United Nations to its commitments through Shadow Reporting supported by UN Women.

All UN entities must submit a plan mapping the road to parity. UN Women’s plan, issued soon after the strategy, covers core recommendations, including to help develop guidelines on an environment at the United Nations that fully empowers women and supports gender equality. As implementation of the strategy moves forward, UN Women will be a leading advocate, marshalling people inside and outside the United Nations. At the 2018 Commission on the Status of Women, it urged both civil society and UN Member States to seize the moment and, on all fronts, ramp up actions to achieve parity.

SPEARHEADED GENDER EQUALITY ACROSS THE SYSTEM

Spearheaded by UN Women, the UN System-wide Action Plan or UN-SWAP, holds UN entities accountable for incorporating gender perspectives in all institutional functions. In 2017, a record 66 UN entities, 94 per cent of the total, reported on indicators of progress under the UN-SWAP. Since the plan was introduced in 2012, the percentage of indicators rated as meeting or exceeding requirements has more than doubled, a sign of sustained improvement on key issues related to gender mainstreaming, such as policy development, strategic planning, oversight, human and financial resources and capacity development.

Persistent areas of weaknesses remain, however, particularly related to gender parity in staffing and adequate resource allocations for achieving gender equality, among others. The next generation of the UN-SWAP, UN-SWAP 2.0, debuted in 2018. It aims at accelerated progress over the next five years. Among other advances, it will help track UN support for the gender dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals.

ADDRESSING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

In late 2017, the UN Secretary-General established a task force dedicated to formulating a rigorous common approach to addressing and preventing sexual harassment across the UN system. Bringing together representatives from all UN organizations, the task force is currently reviewing sexual harassment policies as well as investigation mechanisms. UN Women provides expertise on a number of core issues, including the creation of a joint assistance helpline for UN personnel.

SPEAKING UP ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

As a key player in advancing the UN system’s agenda on indigenous issues, UN Women has helped indigenous women and girls mobilize and influence decisions at a number of international forums. In 2017, with UN Women serving as the annual rotating co-chair of the UN Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues, indigenous women leaders from Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala and Honduras made a powerful impact on the group’s annual meeting in Quito. They shared unique perspectives on the roles of indigenous women in the management of natural resources, improved access to justice, economic empowerment and protection from violence.