Gender, Governance, and Sustainable Development: An Interview with Nahla Valji, UN Resident Coordinator in Eritrea

Interview by Arman Kassam

Biography

Nahla Valji's career in international development began in South Africa, where she worked on a variety of issues ranging from human rights to gender-responsive budgeting, eventually leading the Africa-wide work on transitional justice at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.[1] During this time she founded and served as managing editor of the International Journal of Transitional Justice.[2]

In 2010, she joined the UN, taking on a series of increasingly senior roles at UN Women leading the organization's work on peacekeeping, peace negotiations, and the rule of law as well as engagement with the Security Council.[3] In 2015, she headed the Secretariat for the landmark Global Study on UN Security Council Resolution 1325—a comprehensive Security Council review of progress on women, peace and security.[4]

She subsequently moved to the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General as a Senior Adviser, and head of the Spotlight Initiative—a flagship €500 million program to eliminate violence against women and girls, tied to the Sustainable Development Goals.[5] Her work across these roles led to

[1] "Secretary-General Appoints Ms. Nahla Valji of Canada as the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Eritrea," *UN Sustainable Development Goals*, January 22, 2024, https://unsdg.un.org/latest/announcements/secretary-general-appoints-ms-nahla-valji-canada-united-nations-resident.
[2] "Secretary-General Appoints Ms. Nahla Valji."
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

her recognition in the 2021 edition of Apolitical's 100 Most Influential People in Gender Policy.[6]

In January of 2024, Valji was appointed to the role of UN Resident Coordinator in Eritrea, serving as the Secretary-General's designated representative in the country, coordinating the development work of the UN in country where she works closely with government bodies to support implementation of UN 2030 goals.[7]

Over the span of her career she has played a leading role in building new institutions, including two UN funds and a Security Council mechanism on women, peace and security.[8] She holds a Master's in Political Science and International Relations and a Joint Diploma in Forced Migration Studies from York University, and is co-editor of the Oxford Handbook on Gender and Conflict.[9]

1. *First off, could you talk through your career journey? How did you get involved with the UN, and what did your career progression look like?*

The first half of my career was spent with civil society organizations working firstly in South Africa, and then across the African continent. I began by interning in South Africa shortly after the end of apartheid on human rights issues, specifically socio-economic rights. South Africa is one of the most progressive countries on socio-economic rights. From there, the majority of my time was spent on issues of transitional justice, eg. How do countries recover from conflict and human rights violations? South Africa, of course, had the incredible experience of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and reparations, a solution that they found for themselves that the rest of the world now looks to as an example.[10] This then led to my work at the UN, where I first joined UN Women working on rule of law and justice and eventually on peace and security more generally. I was then, for seven years, in the office of the Secretary General as a senior advisor on gender—the first time that this position had existed. It was an incredible privilege. Lastly, for the last two years I've been the UN Resident Coordinator in Eritrea—which is essentially the Secretary General's representative in a country—heading up the UN team in that country.

---

[6] "Apolitical's 100 Most Influential People in Gender Policy," *Apolitical*, Accessed February 11, 2026, https://apolitical.co/list/en/gender-equality-100.
[7] "The Resident Coordinator," *UN Sustainable Development Goals*, Accessed February 13, 2026, https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/leadership/the-resident-coordinator.
[8] "Secretary-General appoints Ms. Nahla Valji."
[9] Ibid.
[10] "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Accessed February 5, 2026, https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/.

2. *You mentioned that you were the first Senior Advisor on Gender. What do you consider your proudest achievement while you were in that role?*

We've been really lucky in the past decade to have a Secretary General and Deputy Secretary General who really championed issues of gender equality. From the first days of his term, the Secretary General (Antonio Guterres) wanted to ensure that there was parity in the organization, so I worked on his gender parity strategy. Within the first few years, we achieved parity in the senior leadership of the UN for the first time in over seven decades. I also led the largest initiative to end violence against women and girls via a €500 million ($600 million) partnership which brought together the entire UN system to address this issue.

3. *The UN is an institution that faces a lot of public criticism. Combining the time that you spent in the Secretary General's office with your many years in the UN as a whole, you've gained a lot of insight into the high-level operations of the organization. How would you respond to those who criticize its effectiveness and efficiency?*

Criticism of the UN is not new, and it's healthy. The UN is the world's body; people should feel like they have a say and this really is their organization. This criticism has never been needed more than it is right now. If we look around the world—the growing levels of inequality, the climate emergency, the conflicts that we're facing—we need global solutions. The first thing I would say is that consensus is difficult. The United Nations is now 193 countries. Trying to create consensus across 193 countries understandably leads to frustration.

But I would also say that we often only think of the UN General Assembly, the Security Council, and all the high-profile events and headlines. But so much of the work that the UN does is quiet and long term, focusing on everyday benefits. It's strengthening institutions. It's supporting peace processes. It's coordinating humanitarian emergencies and setting global norms. And these efforts don't often make the headlines, but that's the UN's bread and butter. We don't realize the way in which the United Nations shapes so much of our lives. The fact that we get on a plane or get on a boat and that our food is shipped across the world is regulated by norms and regulations that go beyond nation-states. So many aspects of these processes are formalized via UN-created treaties that set norms on trade, air, sea pathways, and food safety and standards. Those basic everyday things that we sometimes forget about—that's also the United Nations.

4. *I want to focus on what you're doing right now in Eritrea. Since 1993, when Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia, the country has faced a severe socioeconomic and political climate.*[11] *In your opinion, which factors contributed the most to the current state of Eritrea?*

Eritrea is a really fascinating country. As you said, it's been independent for just over 30 years now. It fought a 30 year liberation struggle to be independent from Ethiopia and before that was colonized by Britain, Italy, and others. It sits in the horn of Africa; Sudan is next door, as is Ethiopia and their challenges. Yemen is across the water. It sits in a region with a lot of insecurity, and that's a particular challenge that it faces. The Horn is also prone to cyclical drought. It's a country that is experiencing some of the worst effects of climate change, having contributed almost nothing to it. So there are lots of historical, regional, structural, factors, which impact the country.

Despite this, and perhaps in response to those challenges, Eritrea is a country that's really chosen its own development pathway to address its particularities. It has a development approach that's deeply rooted in national ownership and self-reliance. For them, self-reliance means being able to use their own resources to provide for the people. They also have a strong focus on social justice and equality, so things like minimum household standards, universal access to healthcare, education, those kinds of things. So they have constraints on the one hand, but they've made deliberate policy choices within those constraints to really choose their own development pathway. I think it's a country that too little is known about. But in fact, I think there's a lot we can learn from Eritrea, particularly in this moment, where official development assistance and global development aid is being slashed.[12] This is a country that has not been as impacted as other countries or has been impacted in different ways. So I think there's lessons that can be learned from here as well.

5. *What would you say would be one specific lesson countries such as the United States could take from Eritrea?*

Well, I would never want to compare countries, but if I just focus on this country and what we can learn from it, I would give the example of solidarity and care for each other. What strikes you when you come to Eritrea is the

[11] Tirana Hassan, "World Report 2025: Eritrea," *Human Rights Watch*, Accessed February 5, 2026, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/eritrea.
[12] Allison Lombardo and Stuart Patrick, "The Painful, Seismic Shift in Humanitarian Aid – and What's Next," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* December 10, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/12/the-painful-seismic-shift-in-humanitarian-aidand-whats-next.

incredible kindness of people. I'll give you one example of this. For the past three years, we've had the war next door in Sudan, and when that conflict began, the president here said very clearly: "The Sudanese are our brothers and sisters, and when they come to this country there will be no camps. They will be hosted by our communities and by our families." This is a country that does not have a lot, but that is exactly what they have done. They've taken people into their families, into their homes, and into their community centers, and they have used whatever resources they have [to help them]. And when we asked how we can help, the government was very clear: "We're appreciative of your support, but it should not target Sudanese as beneficiaries only. Help us support the Eritrean host communities, so that everybody has access to health, education, and the food that they need." I think this focus on building a sense of community, solidarity, and care for each other is something extraordinary that we could all learn from.

6. *To what extent does gender equality and female empowerment in Eritrea reflect these values of community and social justice that you previously mentioned? What are some challenges the country has faced in this area?*

My first experience or knowledge of Eritrea was actually through the lens of gender equality. When I was in university, one of my first essays was on the role of women and liberation struggles around the world. I found that Eritrea had some of the highest numbers of women fighting in the national liberation struggle. They had over 30% women. Those are similar numbers to those in Guatemala and South Africa, but what was unique about Eritrea was that these women were fighting forces on the front lines. One of the things that allowed them to do that was a very clear political direction that women and men were going to be equal in the liberation struggle, and that gender equality was going to be seen as part of the national liberation struggle. But it was also this idea that Eritrea collectivized care: men and women had equal roles both on the front lines and in terms of caring for young people, elderly, behind the lines in factory work, etc. They were directly involved in things that supported the front lines, and that's really fascinating because it's still something that we're learning about: models of how to address care work and gender roles. The laws and policies of post-independence Eritrea very much recognize women's rights and gender equality. I think there is a real enabling environment here. There are strong foundations for women's participation and equality.

But the reality is, no country in the world has achieved women's equality. I think there's still traditional cultural obstacles to women's full equality here, and like every country, there's still work to be done. Women's full

participation in the labor force, women's political participation, women's economic empowerment, etc. But I think Eritrea is a country with a strong foundation and the political will and leadership to realize those goals.

7. *Even with this strong foundation, Eritrea faces significant political and economic instability after three decades of fighting pre-independence and only having three decades since to recover. What do you see as a way forward? Do you believe the foundation is strong enough to support Eritrea's future development?*

The most important factor in its future development is peace in the region. Eritrea wants greater economic integration and yet is unable to achieve it given the current political climate. If I look at the statements of the government, of the president, there's often talk about the need for that integration. That will allow them to thrive. If we look beyond Eritrea to the continent as a whole, Africa has the resources to support that integration and to support the growth that will drive it: the youth population and innovation, and this country is no exception in that regard. What is needed now is peace, security, stability, and an absence of external intervention and destabilization to really allow the region to thrive. Eritrea would be part of that: there are strong foundations that will help this country and this continent to take a much more influential role on the global stage.

8. *Looking at the domestic situation in Eritrea, what is one specific current initiative that you believe has a high potential for impact?*

Food systems are a real priority for the country. They have really focused on water conservation: in the past 30 years, they have created some 900 dams of various sizes—from micro dams in communities to massive infrastructural dams—and then connected that to solar irrigation and large-scale irrigation. They have been trying to even just optimize the way that planting is done by small-scale farmers. Seventy percent of people in Eritrea do subsistence agriculture, so food systems are a really critical piece of the economy here. If the country can move in the direction of stronger food systems and food security, there is so much potential here. Everything here is organic. It tastes amazing, it's locally grown. Eritrea is a country that really focuses on preserving the climate and thinking about how they generate sufficient food in a way that is safe, nutritious, organic, and safeguards the environment as well.

9. *Zooming out a little, what broader lessons can we learn from both the international and the domestic handling of Eritrea during these last 60 years of war and then independence?*

The biggest thing that I would say is that there is no one size fits all model. Whether it's development, human rights, or foreign policy, we really need to listen, understand, and meet people and countries where they are. Going back to the fact that this country is only 30 years old, somebody once said to me, "Reflect on where your country was at 30 years." What did it need? What space, what partnerships, how was it treated by the international community? I think those are important things to reflect on. If we can work with dialogue, cooperation, principled engagement, that moves us in the right direction, that's the most important thing.

10. *You said, "think about where your country was 30 years into its existence." We're both Canadian—30 years into Canada's existence, nobody was taking Canada seriously. The French and British were still fighting it out during those first decades and we weren't even a real country until 120 years after that. So, in that regard, Eritrea has come way further than Canada ever did in 30 years.*

Absolutely, and I think we often forget that perspective. Going back to the UN as a whole, we've created norms, standards, and international policies that are meant to govern all countries. But this means that we judge all countries by the same standards at the same time, without seeing the evolution of national institutions and each country's unique timeline.

11. *Lastly, I want to shine a spotlight. We've accomplished that with Eritrea in this interview, which has otherwise suffered from a significant lack of awareness. In addition to Eritrea, where should we direct our attention? Which other forgotten crisis, nation, or situation needs to be better publicized and addressed?*

There's so many at the moment, in every corner of the world. I think the most important advice I would give would be to pay attention to what's happening around the world. Because there are large-scale patterns that we need to be paying attention to that stretch across borders. But if we think about specific forgotten crises, the one that comes to mind is the one next door in Sudan. It's not a forgotten crisis, but it's the largest humanitarian catastrophe in the world at the moment, and I don't think it's getting anywhere near the kind of attention that it needs to be getting. There's also Western Africa, the Sahel, what's happening in Latin America at the

moment, the race for the Arctic, and more. There are just so many different parts of the world that require more attention. I fear that, at the moment, our headlines are gravitating toward the sensational and focusing on sound bites, and we're losing the ability to deeply understand different contexts, make connections between those contexts, and contribute in the way that we need to.

12. *One of the most significant roadblocks to people being informed is fatigue. There's just so much going on and it's almost impossible to keep up with it all. What advice do you have for people who may want to stay engaged, but have struggled to figure out how?*

It's something that I struggle with myself, and I struggle with watching some of the younger people I know who deeply care and feel very impacted by everything that's happening in the world at this moment. We need to find this balance between an overload of information and the way in which information is packaged to us, between hope, authenticity and action. Our biggest buffer against cynicism and despair is action.

Find the sources that help you to think critically and independently, create your own opinions by weighing the perspectives you find, and be informed. Contribute in some way, even in your community. It gives you a sense of agency and power over what's happening in the world right now. It's not just about the information, how we consume it, what we consume, or how we understand the world. It's also about what our role and place is in that, and how we act on the information we're given.

Bibliography

"Apolitical's 100 Most Influential People in Gender Policy." *Apolitical*, Accessed February 11, 2026. https://apolitical.co/list/en/gender-equality-100.

Hassan, Tirana. "World Report 2025: Eritrea." *Human Rights Watch*, Accessed February 5, 2026. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/eritrea.

Lombardo, Allison and Stuart Patrick. "The Painful, Seismic Shift in Humanitarian Aid – and What's Next." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* December 10, 2025. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/12/the-painful-seismic-shift-in-humanitarian-aidand-whats-next.

"Secretary-General appoints Ms. Nahla Valji of Canada as the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Eritrea." *UN Sustainable Development Goals*, January 22, 2024. https://unsdg.un.org/latest/announcements/secretary-general-appoints-ms-nahla-valji-canada-united-nations-resident.

"Truth and Reconciliation Commission." Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Accessed February 5, 2026. https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/.

UN Sustainable Development Goals. "The Resident Coordinator." Accessed February 13, 2026. https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/leadership/the-resident-coordinator.