

NEWS | GENDER EQUALITY

The CEO reshaping Women Deliver after its reckoning

Taking the helm after allegations of racism and harassment rocked the organization, Maliha Khan is steering a transformation — questioning power, aid, and who should lead gender equality efforts.

By **Amy Fallon** // 27 April 2026



Maliha Khan, president and CEO of Women Deliver. Photo by: Women Deliver

Maliha Khan arrived as president and CEO of Women Deliver in 2022 as a “direct result” and as part of an “existential transformation” following allegations of racism and harassment within the global advocacy organization, she said.

A queer immigrant woman of color and a Muslim, her candid acknowledgement of her sexuality from the first day in the job marked a milestone in her professional journey.

Nearly four years on, as the group gears up to host its flagship conference in Melbourne from April 27-30, during a time of heightened global instability, growing attacks on women’s rights, and funding pressures, Khan said that the organization had to ask some hard questions and is now a very different organization as a result.



“Women Deliver became a little bit of a poster child for something that’s very, very endemic within the system, within so many institutions and organizations,” said Khan, speaking to Devex from Melbourne, before more than 6,500 attendees convene for the organization’s biggest event yet, which is hosted by the Oceanic Pacific region for the first time.

“I’m not saying that those things weren’t true,” she said. “It was symptomatic of so many other institutions and organizations. It just became a lot more public for Women Deliver, and therefore became a lot more existential for the organization to radically transform.”

Khan replaced interim CEO Kathleen Sherwin — who took over when Katja Iversen resigned after the allegations — when she took the helm of Women Deliver in April 2022.

“I think I was actually a direct result of some of the changes that were happening in the institution and organization,” Khan said.

Women Deliver had been forced to ask itself why it exists, what it is doing, and what its contribution is to the system, and to the girls and women’s movement around the world.

Among the things that they pared back, said Khan, was a 168-point diversity, equity, and inclusion plan that she said would never be useful.

“There’s too many things going on, and it’s too mechanical,” Khan said.

“I sincerely don’t believe that it is the business of big INGOs to achieve impact at the local level. ... It is the business of governments to be accountable to their citizens, all their citizens.”

— Maliha Khan, CEO, Women Deliver

The Women Deliver conference has grown and changed since 2007, when it began with a core mission to address maternal mortality. It’s now one of the world’s largest gender equality events.

All but one African country was represented at Women Deliver in Kigali in 2023, Khan proudly told a media briefing. But when asked by a reporter what impact the organization had made on the continent, the CEO replied that “it’s not Women Deliver’s business to have impact in Africa.”

“I hope that the time of asking an international organization that frankly has no business to have accountability or to do work in these contexts is gone, and we actually move the right question, which is how have those institutions that are grounded in Africa, that are run by Africans, have that accountability,” she said.

She was also recently “really, really struck” to hear the CEO of the International Rescue Committee, David Miliband, still making the case, in an interview, for why “hundreds of millions of dollars, and what remaining ODA there was should be going to large institutions like IRC, to address conflict and fragile states.”

“I sincerely don’t believe that it is the business of big INGOs to achieve impact at the local level,” Khan said. “It is the business of governments to be accountable to their citizens, all their citizens, all the people who live within their boundaries.”

The CEO and organizer of this year’s conference, which has the theme “Change Calls Us Here,” has been described by Women Deliver Board Chair Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka as having a lifelong commitment to gender equality that perfectly aligns with the group’s core mission.

Khan still remembers being tear-gassed for the first time at her school in Pakistan after human rights activist and lawyer Asma Jilani Jahangir spoke.

“We all got up, and we marched behind her and got tear-gassed,” she said. “Jahangir continues to be an inspiration of courage, of standing up for your values, no matter how much you’re threatened going forward.”

Khan worked in development in Pakistan early in her career in the 1990s, before moving into academia, and then had stints with CARE, Oxfam America, and The Rockefeller Foundation in the United Kingdom.

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— Khan

From 2018 until 2022, she was chief programs officer at the Malala Fund, the organization that rose as a response to the near assassination of then 14-year-old Pakistani girl Malala Yousafzai. Khan said that her time at the charity had taught her about the “power of principles.”

This went hand in hand with the power of congregation. “That’s the power of having someone who is so publicly out there that you can say to people what they stand for and what they are a symbol of,” Khan said.

“That brings people together, so you then recognize that when you have someone like Jacinda Ardern, you know that this person stands for something.”

Ardern, a former prime minister of New Zealand, now COP30 special envoy for Oceania, and her predecessor Helen Clark, now the chair of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, will attend and speak at this year’s conference, along with former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Speaking at a Women Deliver media briefing earlier this month, Gillard, the current chair of the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership at King’s College London and The Australian National University, said that polling had shown that attitudes to gender equality in many countries were going backwards, particularly among young men.

“So we need to find new ways of making an impact, new ways of campaigning, a new narrative that enables us to unlock globally and locally waves of public support for the project of gender equality, which, of course, will build a better world for everyone,” she said.

Given Melbourne’s proximity to Pacific nations, the countries most affected by climate change, this year’s conference will have a big focus on climate justice, youth leadership, and will recognize that Pacific women and First Nations women and their communities are central to addressing regional and global challenges.

Other priorities on the agenda will be financing feminist movements, ending sexual and gender-based violence and female genital mutilation, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and LGBTQ+ inclusion.

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We must address the lack of organizational support tailored to the unique challenges of gender- and sexual-minority employees, writes Maliha Khan, CEO of Women Deliver.

Speaking on the latter, Khan said that as an openly gay leader in international development, things had improved for her personally. In a 2024 opinion piece for Devex, she described standing before thousands and openly thanking her wife and son at the Kigali conference as “one of the most moving moments in my life and career.”

Speaking to Devex now, Khan added, “I think in our sector, more and more people are coming out. But there’s still very, very, very few people in positions of leadership who are publicly out with their sexuality; it’s not an easy thing.”

In terms of the collective achievements of Women Deliver, Khan said that Canada’s commitments around its feminist foreign policy and its landmark investment in the Equality Fund, one of the world’s largest feminist funds, were a genesis of the 2019 convening.

Although this was considered one of Women Deliver’s recent achievements, Khan said that those days were now over, but not because she didn’t think governments such as Canada, Australia, the United States, and the U.K. should not be giving funding.

“But I don’t think that it should be called reparations, and it shouldn’t be called overseas development assistance,” she said. “It should be called reparations, because those reparations are still owed, whether those are for colonialism or therefore the climate crisis, or for the military excursions that are going on.”

In the new world order, Khan said she hoped that different countries would take leadership across the board, and that she looked to it not being at a global level, but from middle powers to their own people, more than anything else.

This year, for the first time, Women Deliver will include a “political declaration” on how the development sector moves forward.

Khan, who lives in the U.K. and enjoys motorcycling in her spare time, said that despite the barriers to fulfilling gender equality, she was an optimist.

“This time shall pass, and we will create a new future going forward,” she said.

“I hope that Women Deliver becomes a moment in time, one of the points of conversation, and that we have many, many conversations going forward from there about how we transform this system in these global times.”

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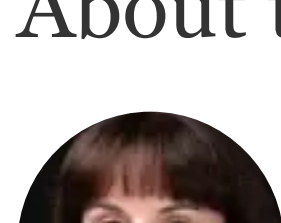
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Amy Fallon is an Australian freelance journalist currently based in Uganda. She has also reported from Australia, the U.K. and Asia, writing for a wide range of outlets on a variety of issues including breaking news, and international development, and human rights topics. Amy has also worked for News Deeply, NPR, The Guardian, AFP news agency, IPS, Citiscope, and others.

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