

The United Nations and Women: Walking the Walk on Empowerment?

Donald Steinberg, | 27 May 2010

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A recent court case in New York confirmed that you can't sue United Nations officials on the basis of gender discrimination. Lucky for them. A quick look at UN practices in hiring, promotions, assignments, dispute settlement, compensation and high-level appointments suggests a clear and systematic pattern of bias against women. "If the UN were a private company located in New York City, it might have gone bankrupt years ago from paying off gender discrimination settlements," says one UN insider, a man with long experience in these issues with only slight hyperbole.

A few statistics tell it all. Only 4 of 33 regional representatives of the Secretary General – the equivalent of UN ambassadors – are women. Rising in the UN system is a treacherous path for women: at the lowest professional levels, women make up 54 percent of all UN system jobs, but that rate drops to about 30 at mid-level ranks, and less than one in four at the upper level under-secretary general and assistant secretary general posts. The UN Office of the Focal Point for Women reports that for the prestigious posts in the Secretariat itself, rates of women's participation are worse at every level than for the system as a whole.

Women's associations within the UN, outside civil society groups and UN offices themselves have documented a series of discriminatory employment practices against women, including slower promotions, fewer prestigious awards or appointments, little if any accommodation for working women with children, and quicker separations. And until last summer, many of the mechanisms for redressing these grievances, as well as charges of sexual harassment, were hopelessly stacked against those filing complaints, forcing them to work through in-house structures that provided little protection from recriminations.

For an organization pledged to support global empowerment of women, this failure to walk the walk in its own house speaks volumes. It is little wonder that issues related to women – e.g., ensuring seats at the table in UN-led peace negotiations, eliminating sexual violence in conflict, or allocating post-conflict reconstruction aid to women's priorities – are given short-shrift in policy circles. Or that nearly a decade after the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, concrete steps to empower and protect women remain largely a dream deferred for those facing abuse, displacement and alienation in wartime.

Let's acknowledge some improvements over the past decade and accelerating under the current Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, including reforms in the in-house grievance settlement system, the appointment of a women deputy secretary-general, support for a new gender entity, and a substantial increase in the portion of women appointed to senior level positions. Still, a male-dominated "old-boy" culture prevails.

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For any institution, eliminating gender bias isn't just a question of fairness or equity: it is good business practice. Why exclude half the talent pool from contributing fully to the organization's mission? In foreign affairs, women not only bring vital skills to traditional "hard" security issues, but they also tend to broaden the dialogue and demonstrate with capacities for cooperation and compromise that are essential to diplomacy and concerns for human security that are increasingly central to international affairs.

Instead of hiding behind impunity, UN officials would be wise to learn the salutary lessons of gender bias lawsuits against the U.S. State Department. In fact, the suit filed by Alison Palmer in 1971 and a class action suit she filed with nine other women five years later and settled in 1990 has helped reform, rejuvenate and deepen the State Department and the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.

When I entered the State Department in 1975, the agency's record on women's participation and empowerment was similar to that of the UN today. Overt discrimination – including an unspoken rule that required single women to resign their commissions if they married – and explicit sexual harassment were vanishing, but a pernicious pattern of subtle discrimination remained well in place. The effects were felt at each level.

- Few women were recruited to take the entry exam, and the examination itself was biased against women, including both the written exam and the oral exam, where a panel of mostly male interviewers tended to favor candidates who resembled themselves. The result was that only one-tenth of Foreign Service officers were women.
- Women who made it through this process were generally shunted into consular and administrative, in contrast to men who entered the more prestigious and career-enhancing political and economic "cones."
- Women were rarely selected for challenging assignments out of their cones or above their rank – "stretch assignment" – and there was a glass ceiling between them and positions as deputy chiefs of mission – the last step before reaching ambassador ranks. As late as 1995, only 9 of 135 deputy positions were held by women.
- There was scant recognition of and even fewer accommodations for working women with children, leading to a pattern of resignations by younger women faced with competing demands of home and office.
- There were few role models or mentoring programs for women, in contrast to a well-established albeit often informal support-system for men.
- Performance evaluations for women – usually prepared by older men – consistently played down their potential, even when current performance was rated the same as male counterparts. The boards reviewing these performance files were usually made up of men as well, who favored promotions for those resembling themselves. Women were given fewer performance awards.

Enter Ms. Palmer. Having entered the Foreign Service in 1959 with a master's degree in African studies from Boston University, Ms. Palmer sought assignment to substantive positions in Africa. She was consistently denied out-of-cone and "stretch" assignments that were common

for men, especially those willing to take tough-to-fill African posts. Her only option was to serve as social secretary to the wife of the U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia. Outraged, she initiated research to document that these discriminatory patterns extended writ large throughout the State Department. Finding that they did, she filed suit – first alone, then with other women – under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which bans sex discrimination in federal employment.

The legal action had a long and torturous history. In the early years, courts ruled consistently against the plaintiffs, arguing that the statistical evidence presented did not prove “disparate treatment” – an intentional pattern of employment decisions based on gender – or “disparate impact” – employment decisions based on criteria that, although appearing neutral, disadvantaged women.

Eventually, however, the tide turned and rulings started to favor the plaintiffs. Several new class-action suits were launched by other women, and about 25-30 discrimination complaints were filed against the State Department each year after 1982. Faced with the prospects of losing the case, the State Department agreed to a settlement in May 1990 under the auspices of the District Court of Washington, D.C.

While no longer disputing its bias against women, the State Department still sought to limit the remedies. In the end, about 150 women received compensation; stretch assignments were granted to a small number of women; and some others were offered high-level posts. A number of remaining issues were resolved in a “global” settlement in 1996, also involving a similar suit filed by African-American officers.

The life-cycle of the lawsuits coincided with a period of changing social attitudes and broader legal reforms that facilitated greater women’s participation and empowerment. Many credit these changes more than the lawsuits with promoting progress. But this should not negate two important effects of the lawsuits.

First, the District Court’s rulings suggested that besides harming the individuals who brought suit, State Department practices undercut the agency’s ability to provide the American people with the best possible foreign policy by devaluing and excluding the contributions of women. Thus, quick-fix compensation measures were insufficient: the State Department couldn’t simply buy-off the plaintiffs with a few dozen appointments to senior positions. Longer-term structural changes and a change of culture were required.

Second, the suits brought issues of gender bias out of the closet and into broad dialogue, such that even before the settlement was reached, incoming Secretary of State James Baker in 1987 made expanded participation of women a high priority “not only because of the law, but because it is the right thing to do.” Again, coupled with the broader social changes, the result was a re-think of formal regulations and unwritten culture of the State Department that has gone well beyond the court-mandated settlement.

Concrete steps were taken. State Department recruiters targeted women to increase their numbers in the testing pool, and pre-examination coaching was offered to women applicants. Written and oral exams were subjected to careful scrutiny by outside experts and changed to

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eliminate gender bias to the extent possible. So were criteria for promotion, assignments, and performance awards. Increasing numbers of women were brought onto the board of examiners and the promotion boards, and a prestigious new award was created to honor Foreign Service personnel who promote the role of women in foreign policy formulation.

As in other government agencies, mentorship programs were put in place for junior women officers, and daycare centers, liberal family leave provisions and other "family-friendly" measures were adopted. Grievance structures were improved and streamlined for those alleging gender-based discrimination, and whistle-blower protection was mandated. A conscious policy of gender balance in high-level political appointments to the State Department has been a feature of most Administrations several decades.

Have these corrective measures had the desired effect? Certainly, the statistics suggest that they have. While full parity has not been achieved, the Secretary of State is a woman, as are six of her top eleven advisors, including the Department's counselor, the director general of the Foreign Service, three under-secretaries, and the director of policy planning.

Indeed, the current policy planning head, Anne-Marie Slaughter, is the first woman to ever serve in that role, breaking a string of 24 male predecessors. All things being equal, the odds against 24 men being appointed consecutively to this position would be 16.8 million to one.

At the marquis showcase of American diplomacy – the U.S. Mission to the United Nations – Ambassador Susan Rice is joined by soon-to-be deputy Rosemary DiCarlo, chief of staff Elizabeth Cousens, and ambassador for special political affairs Brooke Anderson in leading roles. Over-all, about 30 percent of U.S. ambassadors are women – contrasted with the 12 percent figure for UN regional representatives.

It is reasonable to assert that the increasing sight of pants-suit mingling comfortably with the striped-pants set is a reason why the last three presidents have each named a woman to be Secretary of State – Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, and Madeleine Albright.

It is more difficult and perhaps premature to assess whether these changes have had a qualitative impact on U.S. foreign policy: how can one objectively say that foreign policy is "better" or even better implemented now than before. Still, it is clear that the expanded participation of women is bringing broader perspectives into play.

A re-energized Office for Global Women's Affairs under Ambassador Melanne Verveer is now a major player in foreign policy decisions. New programs within USAID and the State Department are targeting girls' education, mother-child health care, trafficking in persons, and women's economic empowerment. Secretary Clinton and Ambassador Rice are highlighting issues related to civilian protection in periods of armed conflict, reaffirming the centrality of women's issues to the achievement of U.S. foreign policy objectives globally.

Change is afoot. The tagline for the State Department's efforts at diversity is: "The Foreign Service should look like America." In the same vein, shouldn't the United Nations look like the world? The question for the UN is whether a similar process can be launched through affirmative action by its leadership in the absence of the threat of punitive lawsuits.

What would such a process look like?

First, it would be comprehensive. It would begin with an outside, independent assessment of the UN gender employment record, highlighting best practices but also exposing discriminatory practices in all their overt and hidden forms, from recruitment to promotion to assignment decisions to performance evaluation. It would consider practices of all UN agencies and departments, and all country missions abroad.

Second, it would have the highest-level support, with continuing visible, personal and meaningful commitment from the Secretary-General himself, the Security Council, and the broader UN membership through the General Assembly. Based on his achievements so far, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is well-placed to serve this role.

Third, it would establish concrete, time-bound, and measurable goals and indicators regarding participation and empowerment of women, and hold agencies, departments and individuals accountable for achieving these results. There would be rewards for compliance and costs for non-compliance, including reduced budgets, formal reprimands, and deferral of promotions.

Fourth, it would involve remedial actions for past abuses, including long-overdue promotions and performance awards for women and hiring programs to bring in women at the senior, mid-level, and entry ranks.

Fifth, it would benefit from full financial and personnel support, recognizing that the short-term costs of programs and promotions would reap much greater benefits down the line in terms of greater efficiency, enhanced morale, and higher retention rates.

Sixth, it would be monitored and evaluated constantly by a joint committee comprising UN management, employee representatives, and outside advisors.

Finally, and perhaps most important, it would involve UN women themselves as planners, implementers and beneficiaries of all programs. The time for top-down decisions – especially by men – is over. The watchwords from now on must be, “Nothing about us without us.”

Faced with a seemingly endless list of international crises and conflicts, declining financial and personnel resources, and huge competing demands for his attention, can the Secretary-General afford to devote the time and energy required to effect a change in culture within the United Nations? Let’s reverse the question: faced with these crises, constraints and demands, can he afford to ignore the talents, insights and commitments of 50 percent of the world’s population?

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