

**A farewell letter from the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women**

Dear Friends and Readers,

This is the last time that I shall be writing to you as Special Adviser for Gender Issues and Advancement of Women. After nearly 38 years in the Organization, I am leaving for a new life and new challenges. I have seen many changes—changes for the better—both qualitative and quantitative in terms of the de facto equality of women and men in the UN.

When I arrived here the day after Labour Day in 1966, there were few women at the Professional level: few D-1s, even fewer D-2s, and none at the Assistant Secretary-General or Under-Secretary-General levels. The first woman to break the ceiling as ASG was Ms. Helvi Sipilä, Finland's first woman lawyer and a redoubtable professional in her own right, with a background in public service, human rights and women's advancement. She was appointed ASG for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs in 1972.

From the UN's inception, but more particularly since the 1970s, the General Assembly, the Commission on the Status of Women, the four World Conferences on Women and the Special Session, Beijing+5, and other UN bodies have routinely recognized the innate unfairness of condoning unequal opportunities for women inside an Organization professing fundamental human rights and equal opportunities for all people—women, men, youth and children—throughout the world.

We have come a long way towards the goal of reaching 50/50 women and men set first by Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and then by the Beijing Conference and the General Assembly in 1995 during the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations. Today, we have reached 37 per cent on overall posts with staff having contracts of one year or more, and 42.5 per cent on posts subject to geographical distribution. Progress was made in women's appointments to high-level and decision-making positions. The second highest position in the Organization, that of Deputy Secretary-General, is held by a woman. There are women heading Secretariat entities, such as UN-Habitat, ECE, ESCWA, the Department of Management and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. In the UN system, over the last 10 or so years, women have headed WHO, UNHCR and WFP, and still head UNICEF and UNFPA. A woman is Prosecutor of the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and another woman is Vice-President of the International Criminal Court. These gains are in no small measure owing to the leadership of the Secretary-General, of many progressive programme managers, male and female, of the persistent advocacy by the Group of Equal Rights for Women in the UN, of changing attitudes, and of mechanisms such as my Office, including the Focal Point for Women, the departmental focal points, the special measures for the achievement

of gender equality and accountability mechanisms, such as the gender and human resources action plans.

Another mechanism which is often forgotten is the Group of Women Ambassadors, now numbering nine, but which numbered zero four decades ago. This Group, initially formed by Ms. Madeleine Albright, has spearheaded a number of initiatives, including encouraging gender sensitivity in peace missions and repeatedly proposing more women appointees as Special Representatives of the Secretary-General in peace operations.

Despite this notable progress over nearly 40 years, much remains to be done. Gender stereotyping is still commonplace, with women staff not always considered on an equal footing to men for promotions, appointments, plum assignments, missions and special post allowances, for example. Flexi-time, which has been proven to enhance job satisfaction and productivity, is granted grudgingly and often with the lingering threat of less than fair appraisals. Harassment and abuse of power, including sexual harassment, are still not taken as seriously as we wish they should be. Although harassment is declared unacceptable, women's complaints are often still ignored or dismissed. The General Service staff, comprising over 60 per cent women, is virtually locked out of a progressive career path. Finally, we need to create a "critical mass" of women in policy- and decision-making and, thus, many more women need to be appointed to senior-level positions. To overcome these obstacles, we need to implement a well-known set of formulae: strong commitment and leadership by example in promoting gender equality; real accountability with sanctions and praise; solidarity on the part of women in partnership with like-minded men; workable mentoring schemes at all levels and at all duty stations; compulsory gender-sensitivity training; advocacy and vigilance; and a great deal of coordination and teamwork. We are happy to learn that Ms. Elisabeth Lindenmayer, the newly appointed and first woman Deputy Chef de Cabinet, is responsible for women's issues. Responsible units have to work together. These include the Office of the Secretary-General, OUSG/ DM, DM/OHRM, OSAGI/Focal Point for Women and all Chiefs of Administration and Personnel.

At this point, in addition to Ms. Helvi Sipila, I would like to mention a few of the women who may have been forgotten, but who have stood out in the past in the long fight for women's rights in the Secretariat: Ms. Pat Tsien and Ms. Claire de Hedervary, the first two Presidents of what is now the Group of Equal Rights for Women; Ms. Mercedes de Briceno, the first Coordinator for the Improvement of the Status of Women in the Secretariat; and Focal Points, Ms. Susan Habachy, Ms. Parin Mohamedi and Ms. Zohreh (ZuZu) Tabatabai. As we forge ahead into this new century, gains have to be consolidated and progress continued. There is no place for complacency, as grounds gained in gender equality can be swiftly and insidiously lost. As I start a new phase of my life, with some trepidation, I might add, I take heart in the warmth and fellowship that working at the UN and with you have brought me personally. I wish you, all of you, the best in your careers and the courage to keep fighting for your convictions and for the ideals and principles on which the United Nations is based.

Angela E.V. King