

UN Special

MAGAZINE DES FONCTIONNAIRES INTERNATIONAUX - THE MAGAZINE OF INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SERVANTS



How a “table” could change the world.

Women & the UN Charter

Why do they write?

The power of the hair? -

Mystery remains...



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Global Goal 5

Is Geneva leading the way to gender equality?

“Did your organization sign the pledge?” Have you heard the conversation circling the corridors of Geneva these past few months? “It will just mean more work for us” responds another; and less often but I have heard: “It’s ridiculous – we’ll end up sacrificing competence”.

DR CLAIRE SOMERVILLE

If you haven’t already heard about the Geneva Gender Champions Pledge for Parity you soon will. In less than a year this movement has gained momentum and we should all take notice because, whilst it is not the first institutional attempt to roll out a parity policy, it is the first to go city-wide, public and lead from the top. And, what is more, so far without resistance.

The pledge for inclusive panels taken by leaders of Geneva organizations and missions is one of three concrete

institutional commitments these key actors have taken to advance gender equality in their organization.

Their success is interesting for several reasons.

The climate has changed. In December 2001 UN Special reported on the outcome of an ILO tribunal that found the WHO administration guilty of gender bias. The WHO had acted decisively to redress the gender imbalance at the top by seeking to secure 6 out of 10 new appointments for women.

The move was successfully challenged and the WHO was criticized for reverse discrimination against the male candidate. Would this happen in 2016? Probably not here in Geneva right now. Evidence demonstrates that gender bias persists: Take for example efforts in the USA to examine gender bias in auditions for professional orchestral musicians. With the introduction of behind the curtain auditions the recruitment of women musicians increased from around 5% in the 1980s to close to parity by 2015. Gender bias no doubt also unfolds in the opposite direction too; women are more likely to gain custody of children in marital breakup. We should caution against essentializing gender characteristics when striving for gender equality. However the very acceptance of the Geneva movement underway

right now and its success in getting 85 Geneva leaders on board in just seven months is a measurable indicator of the sea change we are witnessing.

What is also striking is that we are observing an unusual and welcome top down instigation of change with real faces and individual accountability to ensure institutional action. Feminist movements, women activists and lobbyists have been typically grassroots movements exposing gender inequality and lobbying for change from the bottom up. This movement contributed to legal correctives for example in the form of CEDAW and rolled out national and institutional anti-discrimination legislation. Once these legal structures were secured we began to see

policy responses in the shape of gender equality mechanisms such as gender mainstreaming and equal opportunity declarations. But implementing these policies and genuinely affecting change remains a challenge, and this is where leadership can play a critical role.

Of course gender bias remains even in Geneva. In a recent evaluation of one of my classes an anonymous student commented "Why would you hire a pregnant woman to teach a compulsory course?" Gendered bias can rear its head in the most unexpected places – but generally this tone is out of sync with the Geneva gender zeitgeist and testament to this are student initiatives such as the Gender Dialogues that seek to synergize student voices to

challenge gender stereotypes. Their work at the grassroots and as future leaders is critical to advancing gender equality.

The champion's movement is not alone and is just one of many activities happening at the moment contributing towards Geneva gaining a reputation as a global leader in gender equality in the 2030 agenda. Our own programme of gender research at the Graduate Institute is rapidly expanding and supplying our colleagues with a stream of research and analysis that help close the data gaps. Longitudinal studies on rural change and human rights, women in conflict and peacekeeping, the gendered global political economy as well as grappling with the development of transnational

gender expertise as a category of knowledge and action should help cement Geneva as a hub that can deliver not only in the areas of humanitarian action, law and human rights, security and peacekeeping, global health and trade – but also the gender equality global goal. In the spirit of the Geneva Conventions could we soon see the Geneva Model to Gender Equality? ■

N.B. Claire Somerville is a visiting lecturer, outreach and development coordinator in the Programme on gender and social change, Graduate institute Geneva.

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