**Where's the Justice? Sexual Harassment Continues at the United Nations**

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I remember how fresh I felt on that first day of spring in 2006, when I finally got to put on a flowered dress and head to work. I was living in Geneva, Switzerland at the time and working for a health agency -- a branch of the UN. When I stepped into my office, a male colleague in his late 40's was coming out of his. He walked briskly toward me like he had an important task needing the immediate assistance of the communications officer (me).

"You look like a Singapore Airlines flight attendant," he said smiling and then walked away.

Why did his comment make me feel so horrible? Was he saying something about where he thought I belonged in life, that I ought to be serving cocktails to businessmen in first class? Was he suggesting that the style of my dress was inappropriate for the agency? Was it too short? Too tight? Too flowery? Too colorful? I was plagued. I couldn't get my mind on work. I just sat in my office perplexed, not wanting to move. I lost all motivation for the day. I knew the man was married and had two grown children, and he knew I was in a serious trans-Atlantic relationship. I tried to blow off the comment, but over four years later it still sticks in my mind as verbal sexual abuse.

So where is the UN today in their fight to combat sexual harassment?

Angela Kane, Under-Secretary for Management said in an "Accountability for a Stronger United Nations" statement issued on July 28 2010:

"Assertive new measures and a 'zero-tolerance' approach to sexual harassment have led to a dramatic drop in the number of cases submitted for administrative action."

Her statement comes after a slew of allegations by the departing head of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), Ms. Inga-Britt Ahlenius, who claimed in a report that the Secretary General's Office and the Office of Management have thwarted her efforts to deliver full accountability and transparency to UN system-wide cases of abuse and misconduct. Specifically, Ms. Ahlenius states that her ability to recruit staff, in particular female staff, was undermined by headquarters as were concerns with financial disclosure, procurement and ethics issues.

Ms. Kane responds:

"The Secretary-General and his team consider these instruments key to building a modern UN that strives for excellence and reflects our diverse membership -- including true gender balance. Indeed, the Secretary-General has appointed more women to senior positions than ever before in the Organization's history. He has increased the appointment of women at the three highest ranks by 40 percent; and by 60 percent at the Under-Secretary-General level. Before he took office, there were no female SRSGs (Special Representatives to the Secretary-General). Today there are five."

Hopefully, the new Chief of OIOS will be able to gain some leverage in a department heretofore ignored and criticized by the Secretary General and his offices of management. A shining example of the latter's obstinacy is the 2003 case of Cynthia Brzak and former Secretary General Kofi Annan. Annan's unwillingness to punish then head of UNHCR, Mr. Ruud Lubbers after Annan received the OIOS report citing Lubbers had sexually abused Ms. Brzak was a complete failure of the system. It was the media that put pressure on Lubbers with a lot of bad publicity and eventually led him to resign, effectively solving the problem before Annan had to intervene.

The current Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon does have one notch up on his belt. By July 2009, his goal to win approval from the United Nations General Assembly for the creation of a new Office of Administrative Justice was achieved. The new Office boasts in its handbook the "hallmark of the new system is that it be independent. " Like the old system, the new system is set up to address situations in which staff members feel that their rights have been violated and the rules of the Organization have not been respected. The difference now being that staff do not have to go through a bureaucratic process of informing human resources and then waiting weeks if not months, to have their claim glanced at by heads of their own department--people who may very well be the culprits in the crime of abuse. The new policy provides a much more efficient process for addressing grievances.

The AOJ (Administration of Justice) guide entitled "A Guide to Resolving Disputes" emphasizes the important role of the newly created Dispute Tribunal where independent judges are hired to make binding decisions on individual cases brought before them. If the staff member or the Secretary General dispute the decision, they may then take their case to the Appeals Tribunal for a second review. The guide provides a step-by-step approach on what a staff member should do when they want to report a case of abuse. The manual asks "What do I do first?" and then offers several steps, which include familiarizing oneself with the rules governing the particular matter of abuse and speaking "to colleagues, a supervisor or manager you trust." It then underscores if no resolution is found, that the employee should contact the Ombudsman to avoid litigation. Thus, the staff member who has been a victim of misconduct does not have to wait; he or she can contact the Registries and Staff Legal Assistance office of the UN Dispute Tribunal to put forth his or her case. There is also a new UN Focal Point for Women, which monitors and advocates for gender balance, and also provides counseling and guidance for women staff who contact the Office to resolve situations involving harassment, discrimination, or abuse.

"The main difference is the UN Administrative Tribunal is a binding system. It takes over from a sixty year old peer review process where volunteers are staff members. This process used to be conducted through the Office of Management. In the new system, judges are selected by the General Assembly. It is a two tier external system and we are fully independent," Kristina Carey, Special Assistant to the Executive Director in the Office of Administration of Justice told me via a telephone interview.

The new UN office of Administrative Justice is expected to have a busy season. Sexual abuse, exploitation, and harassment cases within the UN system-wide body consistently seem to surface.

Just last month, the local Sri Lankan press reported allegations of sexual harassment at the UN Mission to Sri Lanka in New York. Apparently, the Deputy Representative (that's next in command to the Ambassador), Mr. Bandula Jayasekara was accused of sexually abusing the mission's First Secretary, Ms. Muditha Haliyedda. The Deputy was recalled back to Sri Lanka after the Ambassador voted to side with Ms. Haliyedda. In response, Mr. Jayasekara went all over the airwaves to dispute Ms. Haliyedda's accusations:

"It is a figment of imagination of a paranoid woman who wants to get rid of me in order to run her parallel administration. This is a tactic used by this employee of the mission in the past, which perhaps was successful and it has been tried again. Her political connections are used to have her own way in the mission and the employees are harassed and threatened. Anyone who stands in her way is threatened to be transferred from the mission."

I know Muditha fairly well, having met her at the mission when I went to interview the Ambassador last year. I always received a warm reception at the mission and met Mr. Jayasekara as well. So I rang Muditha up a few days ago to find out what really happened. As I expected, she wasn't really allowed to discuss details of the case but she was adamant about my not using the phrase "sexual harassment," which she told me she did not like at all.

"Its not in our culture to say such things," she said, seemingly afraid. "I can say only that my Ambassador and my family fully supported me and that the harassment was office harassment."

Muditha would not tell me what she meant by "office" harassment.

"Tala, what I can say is that justice was served and I am at peace with that."

I am happy for Muditha. Maybe she has found her peace. Or so she wants me to believe. Whether it was "office" harassment or sexual harassment, women in her position are often scared to come forward with their complaints. We feel cornered. When you're labeled an exotic flight attendant, or a paranoid woman, you are denied the very sense of professional legitimacy that you need in order to feel confident about asserting your rights. And according to the transnational ideals to which the UN subscribes, such behavior constitutes abusive, misogynistic harassment, no matter which cultural standard you embrace.

**NOTE FROM AUTHOR:**  
  
I posted the article above on Thursday, August 12. The article highlighted the story of a woman from Sri Lanka who had suffered abuse in her office at the United Nations mission in New York. I also shared a sensitive story of my own experience as a previous UN staff member and victim of verbal sexual abuse, and what the UN is doing to mitigate these incidents. I found the comments posted on the Huffington blog to be very much in line with the ongoing problem. One of the comments said my article was making the issue of sexual harassment "menial". I suppose if you are not the one abused and verbally humiliated, then you could never understand. In a classic blame the victim, I felt tempted to hold myself responsible when I knew based on the facts I was not. Perhaps the article I wrote a few weeks ago will better illustrate my case...

Sexual Victims: How The UN Gets Away With Abuse And Misconduct Towards Female Staff

In July, the United Nations launched UN Women, a global division tasked with the goal of improving gender equality and the empowerment of women. United States Ambassador at the United Nations, Dr. Susan Rice warmly congratulated the General Assembly for the unanimous adoption of the UN Women resolution, which would create a separate gender sphere of work to (as Rice stated): "recognize the universality of the goal of improving women's lives, from economic empowerment and increased women's participation in political processes to protection of women and girls from violence and discrimination."

UN Women received a great deal of support and spawned a vast amount of global media coverage from the New York Times to the India Times. Its creation comes at a time when the highly charged case of Cynthia Brzak, an American citizen who in 2003 accused the then head of the UN Refugee Agency, Ruud Lubbers, with "groping her" inside his UN office, has gone all the way to the United States Supreme Court. The case went through several appeals and is up for review in the Supreme Court on September 27th. The Court is expected to make a final decision on whether new rules of conduct will be enforced at UN buildings. It will review a March ruling by the US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit that upheld a New York federal court's dismissal of the case. The dismissal guarantees UN male staffers diplomatic immunity.

As the issue of women returned to the top of the UN agenda, I couldn't help but reflect on my own experiences as a woman, as a middle-easterner, as a young full-time UN staffer when my experience with the Organization, and dealings with UN men, began some eight years ago.

Eight years ago, I returned from a job in London with Amnesty International to start my first UN job with one of their development agencies. Our division was being created and offices refurbished so I was placed in an office next door to an African diplomat in the division for African development. At first, relations were warm: his best friend was Iranian, he often reminded me and he absolutely adored Persian food. "Kabobs are my favorite," he would say smiling. But the relationship grew strained shortly thereafter. He began to eye me, sometimes trying to catch my eye so that he could smile one of his wide-eyed smiles and give me a wink. At one point, on my way to catch an urgent fax, he grabbed my arm in a hallway in front of his colleague and said "Come here girl, you can't just walk by so quickly." When I got back to my office I discovered that I was actually in serious pain. He practically twisted my arm from its socket, I thought to myself. After taking a few breaths, I walked into his spacious office. I sat down in one of his chairs and said bluntly. "Look, I am trying to work out an amicable and professional relationship here, but I would appreciate it if you could please avoid grabbing me or putting your hands on me at all." He just looked back at me and then smiled and said "Is this the American in you talking? Where did the Iranian girl go? She was much warmer."

I left his office speechless and we proceeded to ignore each other in the months that followed. I never reported the incident.

Years later I was in an elevator at the United Nations Secretariat. I was dressed down, in jeans, and was holding a box of my things since I was starting a new contract as a communications consultant in the main building. An Iranian diplomat walked into the elevator just as the doors were closing. We were alone and I could feel his eyes on me from behind. "Are you Brazilian?" he asked me. I replied that I was not. I guessed he did not suspect that I was also an Iranian. "Oh," he went on, "I am very interested in going to these Brazilian nightclubs." "I am not Brazilian," I repeated. "Are you an intern?" he asked back with a sly smile. I turned to him and replied "No, but (in Farsi) I am an Iranian and what you are doing is completely inappropriate." His face sank and turned very red. He got off at the next floor without saying goodbye.

I have heard of dozens of such instances. In the Congo, one of the UN staffers asked me to be his "Persian princess". He knew I was married. Just last month, a UN fellow journalist came barging into my office and asked me to take "notes" for him because he was too busy and knew I was an efficient "woman". I looked at him in shock, but he was serious.

Throughout these experiences, I couldn't help but feel that somehow I was to blame. Am I too "American"? Was I being too much of a career woman when I could have tried to be a bit more playful? Am I too sensitive?

So much of my personal experience seems to overlap with Brzak's. She is an American. She has been described as volatile and aggressive. But as these stereotypical labels continue to brand strong independent outspoken women, I realized this name tagging is just a common weave that is woven by the men inside a system that demonizes women who speak out for their rights. Perhaps a copy of Simone de Beauvoir's "Second Sex" could be written into the Supreme Court decision as mandatory reading for all UN male staffers.

Brzak has alleged time and time again that even after Lubbers was forced to resign, male staffers at the UN continued to harass her. An internal investigation by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) eventually succeeded in getting Lubbers off UNHCR payroll, but the sense that she was to blame for needlessly damaging social relations inside her department, has never left her. A co-plantiff in the case, Nasr Ishak, who also worked at UNHCR and alleged abuse by Lubbers, complained as well that U.N. officials have repeatedly bullied Brzak, released her confidential medical records, and sidelined her performance at work. We all just seem so trapped.

A few weeks ago, I went to visit Michael Dudley at the OIOS (Office for Internal Oversight Services). Michael is the lead investigator into sexual harassment cases filed by UN staff against UN staff. Michael admitted that these investigations face "serious challenges" mainly owing to the vast array of diverse cultures and social expectations of people working for the UN across the globe.

"Many female staff go through instances of benign to severe incidents of harassment. And a lot of sexual harassment can be as subtle as a wink," Dudley told me.

In response to the Brzak case and several other reports of abuse from UN staffers in India, Lebanon, Kuwait, Liberia, and Gaza-to name a few, OIOS has implemented a new training program for UN staff to better understand what sexual harassment is and how to prevent abuse within their office environment. Its a tough challenge, as there are some 60,000 UN staffers worldwide, many of whom subscribe to different standards for what constitutes acceptable behavior between men and women.

The multimedia and interactive course has trained some 200 staff. Its participants, according to the course objectives, "acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to analyze complaints of sexual harassment, interview relevant parties, obtain and analyse evidence and prepare a report specifying the facts established and outlining the findings."

The opening exercise is a video which outlines how to "handle emotion" and then moves on to issues of trust and physical contact between co-workers. It concludes with a "distressed colleague exercise," and provides a follow up methodology entitled "victimology."

Whatever the outcome of the case, I congratulate the women who have spoken out against sexual harassment. They took many risks that affected their personal livelihoods in order to force a change within the system. UN men can no longer be allowed to smile and laugh this off; hopefully UN Women won't let them.

The Supreme Court decision on whether to take the case is due on September 27th. Please look for my interview with Cynthia's attorney, Edward Flaherty on July 15th on http://www.talkradionews.com. A one-on-one interview with Cynthia is forthcoming on August 27th.