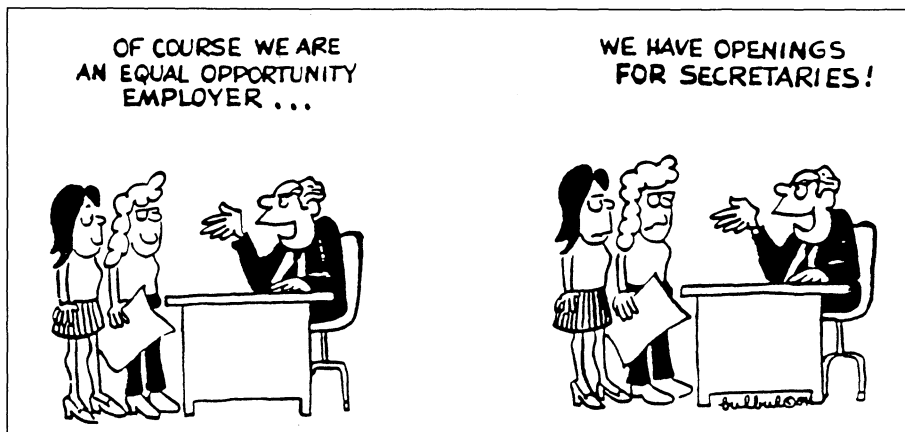


ON THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE WORK OF THE UNITED NATIONS



Credit: Equal Time (UN Ad Hoc Group on Equal Rights for Women)

Stephen Lewis

Bien que l'Organisation des Nations Unies a parrainé la Décennie pour les femmes, les politiques et les pratiques d'emploi de cette organisation ont été discriminatoires envers les employées au cours de ses quarante années d'existence. Ambassadeur et Représentant permanent du Canada aux Nations Unies, Stephen Lewis prononça un important discours à un comité de l'ONU le 4 décembre 1985, dans lequel il s'adressa à la participation des femmes dans le travail de l'ONU. Il rappela à ses collègues qu'en manquant de respecter le préambule de la Charte – qui affirme l'égalité des droits pour hommes et femmes – l'ONU s'est fait un modèle d'inégalité. Il évalue le lamentable manque de progrès fait vers ce but pendant la Décennie pour les femmes, et il esquisse plusieurs stratégies pour des mesures immédiates en vue de remédier à la situation. Les observations qui suivent sont extraites de son discours.

I am here to speak to the question of the participation and representation of women in the work of the United Nations. The United Nations is, in its personnel practices, and I regret this deeply, a model of inequality and has been a model of inequality for 40 years. I remind my good friends and colleagues in this room that we have not honoured the preamble of this Charter – to reaffirm faith in the equal rights of men and women. We have not honoured the revelations, the insights, the demands, which accompanied the be-

ginning of the Decade for Women in 1975 and 76.

It makes me a little angry that there is so much information, so much data, so much material on discrimination against women within this environment, material which is stark and unrelieved, but which, time again when we address it, lapses into passivity. Our resolutions are never acted upon and we have barely moved forward . . . Progress in the field of women's opportunities and rights in this arena, Mr. Chairman, is so minutely incremental, it's like a parody of social change.

Let us look at the words of Mrs. Mercedes Pulido De Briceno, our Assistant Secretary-General and Coordinator for the Improvement of the Status of Women in the Secretariat. On November 21st, she spoke to this Committee, and her conclusions, after a searching analysis at this point in her tenure, are really quite startling. She says "in real terms women are largely invisible." She says there are very few women at levels above P-4; that three out of four professional women in the Secretariat work in service-oriented occupations. "In the regional commissions where they should be especially prominent, women are practically excluded . . . In the political area of the Secretariat, women remain observers." How does our organization tolerate the persistence of that kind of inequity? She says there are severe imbalances caused by regional under-representation. She reminds us that "in recruitment, we are

facing a situation that may actually lead to a reduced presence of women." By what extraordinary ingenuity can we fashion a recruitment process which diminishes the objective which we are trying to achieve? Mrs. Pulido de Briceno says career development is far removed from equal opportunities.

May I be presumptuous enough, Mr. Chairman, to remind my colleagues again of Article 8 of the Charter: "The United Nations shall place no restrictions," I repeat, "no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate in any capacity and under conditions of equality in its principal and subsidiary organs." We make a mockery of the Charter. It lies before us, a sad remnant of the legitimacy it should confer upon equality . . . The reputation of the United Nations, internally and externally, on questions of women's rights, is sorely violated by experience.

Mr. Chairman, what is worse, and most troubling to Canada, and I know, to many other delegations here, is the absence of women in senior posts within the system. Most disconcerting of all, Mr. Chairman, is that the improvement over the Decade has been negligible. May I say to my colleagues, we have had three international conferences during the Decade for Women. We have had massive consciousness raising, we have had an inundation of resolutions. It is as though we here at the United Nations were impervious. Again it mocks the organization.

I want to make reference to one further document which would be a matter of some controversy in this organization and that's the document called "Equal Time." It is put out, as you know, by the Ad Hoc Group on Equal Rights for Women. They make an analysis the like of which I have yet to see in this Organization. The Ad Hoc Group, a noble band of women who have worked heroically for reform within – has some quite biting and bitter comments to make and I want to read two of them into the record, Sir. They say, first, "it is not too severe to say that the whole rest of the world has gone forward in advancing the roles and status of women, except the world's organizations includ-

ing that which should be a model – the United Nations Secretariat, which itself lags far behind”. And then they say, and I agree that this is a comment which is most unsettling, “the Secretary-General and his fellow executive heads would not dare, in 1985, to allow ethnic racism to be reflected in their personnel policies every week, every month, every year.” And, Mr. Chairman, you know and I know, Sir, that if there were evidence of racism in personnel policies, that evidence would be expunged in a matter of weeks, days, hours. But, Mr. Chairman, we discriminate on the basis of gender and it continues to happen unabated. And so long as it continues, that kind of analogy will continue to haunt us.

I have spent about 25 of my years not in the diplomatic service but in public life, most of it dealing directly with public sectors primarily in Canada but also beyond. I think I can say, mournfully, that I have never seen a situation around the rights of women and equal opportunities for women as bad as the one which my brief experience at the United Nations has revealed. This place, and I say it with affection for my colleagues, is claustrophobically male. That is simply not tolerable in an organization which must be a model for the international community.

You know that Canada has regard for the Secretariat and speaks of it warmly and defends it vigorously against its detractors. But we have collectively to make a change. The Fortieth Anniversary and the end of the Decade for Women seem to us to be the turning point. We welcome the immediate setting of a thirty percent recruitment target for women during the biennium 1986-87. It is not a quota, it is not a mandatory matter, it is a target, the achievement of which will benefit us all because the more women there are in senior and central roles in the Secretariat, the more the value of this organization increases.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, we have no illusions as to the difficulties involved. There are at least three clear imperatives without which the whole plan will come to nought. The first is that the Member States – let me say Canada is by no means exonerated from this – must advance women candidates for all jobs in this organization and especially for the senior jobs. Secondly, we in Canada believe that the Secretariat must have the right, indeed, must be encouraged, to reach out to rec-

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Illustration by Wendy Hoile

ruit women candidates from all over the world, particularly from those regions which are currently under-represented. And finally, as has been demonstrated, the Secretariat itself must act, dramatically and with determination.

Mr. Chairman, there is a common phrase that is always used in this United Nations system to describe the bedevilment of the system. It is “lack of political will” that is considered to be the nemesis

of the United Nations community. But there can be no defence, no excuse, no explanation, Sir, for “lack of political will” when it comes to equality for women. We must resurrect the sullied phrases of our Charter so that in the next 40 years they will finally ring with truth.

Stephen Lewis is Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations.