**AIIA: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY EVENT**

**WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE: SOME INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

**Reflections on a diplomatic career by Caroline Millar**

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Introduction

Good afternoon.

I have been asked to discuss my experience in rising to a senior position in DFAT: what the barriers were and possibly still are; and my experience as a diplomat, including with other women diplomats. I’ve also been asked to talk a little bit about the new UN organisation, UN Women – although I think time constraints may mean we leave that to the discussion time.

Looking back, I feel extremely fortunate to have had a tremendously interesting, diverse and stimulating career. I’ve had the privilege of working with smart, distinguished and inspiring women and men both in Australia and overseas.

Also looking back, I don’t feel conscious of experiencing any barriers to advancement. Now, that’s not to say I have not encountered prejudice and sexism, particularly in the earlier part of my career. But I have never felt barred from getting on in the Department because of being a woman. And serving overseas, it was either completely irrelevant or seemed to provide – particularly in younger days - significant advantages!

I’ve had rewarding work in bilateral posts: in an impoverished and isolated Vietnam as a third secretary in the 1980s - helping to develop a more substantive relationship as Vietnam began to open up following the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War; and in our most important post, Washington – where the experience of working with clever, generous and dynamic US colleagues – including some impressive senior US women - on major issues of significance for Australia and globally was incredibly stimulating.

I’ve represented Australia in the United Nations - in postings to New York and Geneva – running resolutions against French nuclear testing in the Pacific, negotiating nuclear non-proliferation and conventional disarmament agreements, including most recently as Ambassador, and working closely with the UN on human rights and humanitarian issues. This work has been variously fun, frustrating and highly rewarding. I have also worked closely with Asia Pacific countries to develop joint regional approaches to these issues and to combating people smuggling and trafficking. My delightful Indonesian counterpart in this work was a woman.

Key changes benefiting career women

Of course I was lucky to join the Foreign Service when I did, in 1983. Only a few years earlier and I may well have had a somewhat difference experience.

Looking back, I can identify some key legislative and other milestones that both reflected and helped drive social change in ways that made it much easier for a woman first to have a public service career, including a foreign service career, and secondly to have one without being forced to make an absolute choice between work and family. That is not to say that work/life balance issues do not continue to pose tricky choices for women – and for men. They do. But that’s quite different from institutional barriers or the absence of practical policies and enabling conditions of service.

So, what were these milestones that helped create a work environment in which it was possible for someone like me to have a strong career and a family?

Two landmark pieces of legislation enacted before I joined the APS stand out. The 1966 Act removing the requirement for women in the APS to resign on marriage and the 1973 Act providing three months paid maternity leave for APS women. This legislation was self-evidently fundamental. I recall vividly, on joining the Department, the war stories of some of the senior women for whom this legislation was transformative. I certainly admire and feel grateful to the trail blazing Foreign Service women who came before.

During my own career, three other things stand out.

First and foremost, the astonishing controversial but enormously important1984 Sex Discrimination Act which came about in large part to implement Australia’s obligations under the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

Secondly, in 1996, DFAT (like other parts of the APS) opened a child care centre (where my own daughter spent some very happy early years).

Thirdly, shortly after that, the Department, driven by a reformist Secretary, Ashton Calvert, and energetic negotiators on both sides of the workplace bargaining process developed flexible conditions of service for all staff in a succession of workplace agreements. I was directly involved in this process as lead negotiator on the management side for the 2000 Certified Agreement – which formed the basis of the conditions we continue to enjoy. Women in particular – but not only women – benefitted from elements such as paid carers leave and possibility of permanent part-time work at more senior levels.

Some personal experiences

Now when I joined the APS in 1983, it was the year before the Sex Discrimination Act.

That year saw a record number of 9 women out of 29 members of the Foreign Service training course. We had a terrific group of people on the course. But the course presenters can only be described as a mixed bag. Some were first rate. But some exuded sexism from every pore. One regular presenter discussed diplomatic behaviour in exclusively masculine terms, for example, “the diplomat should wear a three piece suit” On another occasion, a crusty old administrative officer snarled at us that diplomats had “sold their masculinity to pay for their elocution lessons”! While I dismissed this as outmoded sexist social attitudes by some of my more unreconstructed male colleagues, I wondered in my heart of hearts if I was up to withstanding these sorts of attitudes over the course of a career.

There was also much corridor discussion of which jobs were or were not suitable for women. Stories of old-school Ambassadors refusing to have women at their posts were circulated – not without credibility. The justifications were incompatibility of our own liberal values with the more restricted cultural mores of other societies (women would not be accepted as serious interlocutors with the host governments), local security issues (i.e. too dangerous for a woman) or the assumption that women generally or individual women were not “tough “enough for particular jobs or environments. One of my female colleagues was counselled against applying for and/or refused three postings on these sorts of grounds. The posts were Bangladesh, Mexico City and Islamabad. This seemed just as ludicrous to me then as it must seem to you now.

But it didn’t take long after the passage of the Sex Discrimination Act for practices to change. Women were joining the Department in increasing numbers and being posted just about everywhere without facing conspicuously more difficulties in gaining access to host governments or dealing with security challenges than their male counterparts. This Act removed important barriers.

Of course underlying social attitudes of some of my less unreconstructed male colleagues took a bit longer. And, a few years later, as elsewhere in the western world, women faced the era of the backlash, i.e. the denial that advancement or opportunity could have been the result of merit but rather was because of EEO, affirmative action or more salacious reasons. My posting to Washington in 1989, the first by any female policy officer in 15 years, was accompanied by just about all of this sort of stuff. It died down after a while and a number of Australian and US colleagues made a particular point of saying they hoped I had never thought that they had doubted my ability because I was a woman etc etc...or that I had got there only because of EEO...

On these first two postings, I was single. That brought advantages and disadvantages. In Vietnam, no one from street vendors to ministers could resist the temptation to ask “co dia dinh chua” i.e.” are you married yet”. The correct answer to which was not yes or no but “chua co”, “not yet”. The inevitable response was “why not?” Getting a bit sick of this at the age of 25 when I no intention whatsoever of getting married yet, I retorted with a famous saying of Ho Chi Minh “khong co gi quy hon doc lap tu do” , “nothing is more precious than independence and freedom”. That inevitably brought the house down and ended the conversation.

In Washington and back in Australia it was bit harder. There was still a sense that career women had probably made a deliberate choice not to have a family and were therefore fair game. No so. There was also quite a bit of resentment from married male officers who seemed to think it was alright for me to work longer hours because I didn’t have a family to get back to. And some of their wives seemed dead jealous of the apparently wild social life I was thought to be leading. I remember once retorting that if I didn’t get out of the office earlier I’d never have a chance to have the social life that might make it possible to have a family. This gave some pause for thought.

Progress

Well, time has gone by and attitudes have changed.

Women are joining DFAT in slightly greater numbers than men. And they have gradually moved into all senior levels – although we have not yet had a woman Secretary. The fantastic young women joining DFAT today experience a workplace in which women’s contribution at all levels is accepted and valued. Gender really is not an issue. They see no formal barriers and have no concept of the social attitudes at the time of the Sex Discrimination Act or the subsequent backlash. They do of course experience the perennial challenge of managing work and family.

But the real test lies not in the number of women policy officers joining DFAT but in the number of women rising to become SES officers in Canberra and Ambassadors overseas.

I was unable to track down the stats for 1983, the year I joined. The closest I could find was 1986, two years after the passage of the Sex Discrimination Act.

In 1986 there was only one female SES officer in Canberra (2 %), with four female Heads of Mission/Post (4.4%).

By 1991, well and truly in the era of the backlash - the number of senior women had reached a staggering four SES across the Department (2.5%), with three Heads of Mission/Post overseas (3%).

But by 2009-10 this had significantly increased to 58 SES (26%) across the Department, with 24 female Heads of Mission/Post overseas (25.5%).

So women are doing well but still have some way to track.

Internationally this was brought home to me most recently in my posting as Ambassador to the United Nations and Ambassador for Disarmament in Geneva. I had had little reason to think much about gender in the workplace for years. But I was astonished to find on arrival in Geneva that in most meetings I was the only woman Ambassador. Out of the 245 Ambassadors represented there, only 14 were women. That has now risen to 33 – still only 13%. I should add, however, that these women were from very diverse countries and primarily from the developing world: Africa, Asia and Latin America as well as Nordic countries.

**Conclusion**

One indicator of how far we have come is the reaction by junior female colleagues to my old war stories. They find them astonishing, sometimes shocking, but usually hilarious - a bit like when my mother’s generation might have found granny’s crinolines with hoops, or skirts with bustles, in an old attic safe.

But my stories pale into insignificance compared to the reactions to the 1984 Sex Discrimination Act. The Hansard debates make shocking or hilarious reading depending on your point of view. The Act was seen by its opponents as an outright attack on the family and traditional values. One MP characterised it as”pseudo-intellectualism of selfish and unrepresentative feminism and doctrinaire Marxist-socialist precepts of contrived equality – defying even the laws of nature.” It was hard then and seems inconceivable now to read this into a bill designed to make discrimination against women illegal.

But I will finish with a real crinoline in the closet, the legendary 1963 minute from an officer in the Department of Trade which said it was difficult to visualise women as Trade Commissioners because:

“It is extremely doubtful if a woman could, year after year, under a variety of conditions, stand the fairly severe strains and stresses, mentally and physically, which are part of the life of a Trade Commissioner.”

“A man normally has his household run efficiently by his wife, who also looks after much of the entertaining. A woman Trade Commissioner would have all this on top of her normal work.”

And the coup de grace: “A spinster lady can, and very often does, turn into something of a battleaxe with the passing of the years. A man usually mellows.”

I think we’ve come a little way since then. Don’t you?

Thank you very much.