



In the Push for Global Gender Equality, Is Rhetoric Beating Out Reality?

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One of the most important jobs for the United Nations in the 21st Century is its peacekeeping missions. Because the U.N. has an aggressive agenda for gender equity, you might instinctively think it would ensure that women play a prominent role in the peacekeeping arena.

However, you would be wrong, according to Rachael Mayanja, an assistant U.N. secretary-general and special advisor on gender issues and advancement of women. None of the U.N.'s 18 peacekeeping missions around the globe, she noted, is currently directed by a female.

Mayanja -- who spoke at the 2007 annual conference of the Association for Human Resources Management in International Organizations (AHRMIO), held at Wharton this month -- said that she was rebuffed when she lobbied key decision-makers at the U.N. for the appointment of a woman. They told her that "the heads of peacekeeping missions must have [experience] managing large numbers of people -- and you should not try to reduce the standards."

And yet when the next head of a peacekeeping team was appointed, Mayanja said, it was another man, with no prior experiencing in managing a large organization. "Is it possible [they] are just applying these criteria to women?" she asked her audience of human resource professionals.

Mayanja's hour-long presentation amounted to something of a scolding -- albeit one that was delivered in the lilting tones of her native Uganda, and with an understated yet occasionally biting sense of humor. She challenged her audience with the message that during three decades of pushing for gender equity, human resource leaders have been given the tools to promote more women into positions of power, but do not use them nearly enough. "What will you do when all the women rise up and say it's high time to do something about HR?" she asked. "I would like to suggest that it's high time HR examines itself and does something to make sure that gender balance becomes a reality."

An 'Open Whistleblower'

Mayanja herself knows a few things herself about overcoming obstacles. Raised and educated in Uganda at Makerere University, she earned a master's degree in law from Harvard University while raising three children. She has worked much of her career at the U.N., including stints in peacekeeping in Namibia from 1989 to 1990 and in Iraq and Kuwait from 1992 to 1994. She has also worked extensively in human resources, heading the HR office of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization.

The former U.N. secretary-general, Kofi Annan, named Mayanja as a special advisor on women's issues in August 2004 and presented her with a wide portfolio -- including the U.N.'s broader efforts to end discrimination and violence directed at women, especially in the world's poorer and more conflict-ridden nations.



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However, Mayanja has also used her high-profile position to push for reform within the U.N. itself, including seeking gender equality in naming senior officials to manage major global programs. Her Wharton talk was entitled "Gender Balance: Rhetoric or Reality," and her message to AHRMIO -- an organization of human resource officials from more than 55 U.N. and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) -- made it clear she believes that the rhetoric is still winning out. "In HR, we have become so impotent that maybe we need a little bottle of Viagra.... I don't know whether we have people here from the pharmaceutical [industry], so that we can reclaim the ground that we lost," she said, making her point with laughter.

The lack of progress within the United Nations itself is vexing, Mayanja adds, because it clearly contradicts the body's official policy, which has been expressed again and again. In fact, she said that the U.N. has passed some 44 separate resolutions over the years in support of seeking gender equality in the workforce.

In spite of the frequent resolutions, an outside consultant hired by her office found that only 39% of the professional positions within the U.N. are held by women, and just 26% of the managerial posts. The picture within U.N. agencies is quite similar, according to Mayanja. The consultant found that 41.6% of professional jobs there are held by females and 29% of the managerial jobs. Only 18 of the 192 permanent U.N. representatives from the world's nations are women.

The problems at the U.N. are little different from the private sector, where just two of the top 100 companies, according to their market value, have a woman as the CEO, she acknowledged. But she did not try to hide her frustrations in pushing for change in the U.N., even with the full support of her boss, the secretary-general. "I am a whistleblower, but I am not anonymous," Mayanja said. "I am an open whistleblower, and if I blow my whistle, I come to you and I report the facts. I never report anything that has not been given to me, and I'm a very fair whistleblower, but this is my job."

Greater Role for Women

Mayanja's most visible effort has been her attempts to advance the role of women in U.N. peacekeeping efforts, backed by a resolution that the world body passed in 2000. Advocates have argued that women have suffered disproportionately in many of the world's violent conflicts -- especially in Mayanja's native Africa -- and that greater involvement of females in peacekeeping will ensure more community support and more prosecution of war crimes involving rape and sexual assault. For example, she has called on Sudanese women to play a greater role in curbing the genocide in Darfur.

Mayanja said that in pushing for the U.N. to name a woman to head any of its 18 peacekeeping missions, she drew up lists of qualified females -- such as former government ministers and ambassadors -- and took them to the offices of key decision-makers. But little seemed to dissuade these individuals from the idea that the available women candidates did not meet the criteria they had established. "Do you speak out?" she asked her audience. "Or am I a lonely person who can soon become a 'crazy' person -- because when you keep saying the same thing and they are explaining to you that they don't need people and I keep going back [and] sending names... It's maybe something wrong [with me]."

Mayanja listed the different reasons officials have given her as to why they could not fill positions with women candidates, but she was most exasperated by the explanation that they cannot find females who are qualified. She noted that in the Caribbean, young men have a high dropout rate and the majority of college students are female -- yet there are no Caribbean women in key management jobs at the U.N.

Other excuses that Mayanja hears are that women are not good at networking, or they are not able to find the proper balance in the work environment at the U.N. "I tell you, we are the only ones who have these kinds of multi-tasks -- the men don't?" she asked in a sarcastic tone. "That is why we're being kept out: The men don't have children, they don't have parents, they don't have sick people to worry about, they don't play golf. They don't have that need to balance."

Later, in response to questions, she added one other excuse that is particularly sensitive when it comes to open debate -- political pressures. For example, if "a particular country is paying more than the others [to fund an organization and its programs]," Mayanja said, and that country is promoting a man for a particular position, "your plans to hire a woman are undermined."

'Positive Action'

Mayanja told another questioner that she supports certain types of affirmative action -- or "positive action," as she called it -- in order to promote gender equity, but only for a limited amount of time. "It has to be for a specific period. It can't go on indefinitely. If it does, obviously it becomes reverse discrimination. You must therefore have a plan in which you [decide] that within the next five years, I am going to improve this situation. I cannot allow it to continue." She added that any affirmative action program needs to be highly transparent to all workers.

In a short interview after her lecture, Mayanja offered some advice for any human resource professional looking to turn around a gender equality gap. She said it's important to begin with good statistics, spelling out the actual numbers at that company or organization, and to know the official policy regarding gender equity.

"And what I would do is try to enforce those policies -- enforce them, not in a very bureaucratic way, but go to the managers and tell them, 'You are not doing well at HR. It is bringing the entire organization down and I would like to help with this situation,'" she said. "Believe me, 99% of managers would like to help with this situation."

In a broader sense, Mayanja expressed concern, both in her lecture and afterwards, that human resource professionals have lost some of their focus on fighting for gender equity, a struggle that has now been on the agenda for more than a generation in many organizations and private companies. "We have lost that kind of drive. We need to get it back."

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