

WOMEN IN THE FOREIGN SERVICE: A QUIET REVOLUTION

BARBARA J. GOOD

Any role for women in United States foreign policy and diplomacy is recent. Until just a decade ago, the Foreign Service to a large degree, and the domestic service to a lesser, reflected and applied all of the traditional prejudices against employed women known in American society as a whole.

Discrimination began when the Department of State itself began, under our first secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson, in 1789. His staff of seven clerks did not include any women. Jefferson as president (1800-1808) declared in a letter to Secre-

tary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin, that women in public office were an innovation for which neither the citizenry nor he was prepared.

The first female employee of the Department of State was one Mrs. March, according to the historian Homer L. Calkin in *Women in the Department of State: Their Role in American Foreign Affairs*. On September 28, 1804 she received six cents a copy for "folding, stitching and covering with cartridge and blue paper" each of 3,467 copies of the laws passed by the first session of the eighth Congress. This modest beginning was auspicious only in one respect: there was no discrimination in pay; Mrs. March received the same amount given one William Duane for similar work. Still, for many years, no woman could be employed by the department except on a part-time basis, and usually the work was done at home because women were not allowed on government premises. The common task was that of copyist, the forerunner of today's typist.

Slowly, however, major barriers fell until one remained—the permission to join the diplomatic service. During the 19th century a number of women unsuccessfully sought appointments to US diplomatic and consular missions abroad. In 1909 Frederick Van Dyne explained the problem as diplomats then saw it. He wrote: "Perhaps the greatest obstacle to the employment of women as diplomatic officers is their well-known inability to keep a secret."

The women's suffrage movement and World War I in all likelihood gave women inspiration and opportunity to enter more fields of employment. A woman took the examination for the diplomatic service in

1921, but alas, failed both the written and the oral examinations, which were then given together. In 1921-23 there were ten instances when women took the Foreign Service examinations—six for the diplomatic exams and four the consular exams. But it was Lucile Atcherson of Ohio who became the first woman to pass the examinations and become an officer in the US diplomatic service in 1922. Ms. Atcherson ranked third in the examination with a score of 86.60, only .57 percent behind the highest scoring candidate. A second woman entered the service in 1925. One senior officer (male) subsequently proposed a ban on admitting more women. He thought it a good idea to wait and observe the usefulness of those already in before opening the "floodgates," even though Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes, in 1924, had supported fair treatment of all persons.

The "flood" of women recruits was at best only a trickle. Between 1921 and the onset of World War II, only six women were appointed as officers via the examination process. The all-male establishment had many simplistic and paternalistic notions about women. It was convinced, for example, that women serving abroad would be "compromised" by male officials in the country of assignment, that in Moslem countries they would be faced with purdah, and that women could not function in the traditional "macho" societies of Latin America. Women in the Foreign Service would, it was thought, also come in contact with the "wrong elements"; consular work overseas could mean dealing with rough and tough sailors, police officials, and prisoners. Furthermore, the depart-

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The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect United States government policy. This article is excerpted from a chapter prepared for an anthology of essays, entitled *Facing the Fearful Father: Essays in Theory and Strategy for a Nonsexist Future*, edited by Professor Margaret Murry of Mississippi State University.

ment believed that foreign affairs ministries abroad might not take a woman seriously as a political officer. Finally, when women were admitted as Foreign Service officers, it was understood that they would remain single; a marriage certificate required a letter of resignation—policy which, though unwritten, remained for almost 50 years; that is, until mid-1971.

The policy of "femina non grata" was not equally true for secretaries. Few men were willing to do secretarial work, except in the earliest days of diplomacy when private male secretaries entered the service. Those men accepted secretarial duties as a means for entrance into an elite, if ill-paid, diplomatic service. Warren Frederick Illchman in *Professional Diplomacy* wrote: "The preeminently masculine calling of diplomacy was exposed after the war to the 'onslaught' of the liberated and newly enfranchised American women."

A shortage of manpower during World War II and rapidly expanding global diplomatic relations after the war gradually increased the number of women serving in foreign affairs. A few women even managed to rise to senior positions, among them, Ruth Bryan Owen, who was named minister plenipotentiary to Denmark by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933. Frances E. Willis served as ambassador to Switzerland, Norway and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka); Margaret Joy Tibbets, ambassador to Norway; Carol C. Laise, ambassador to Nepal and later the first woman director general of the Foreign Service. Many of these women have since retired. With peace and return to "normalcy" the male-dominated establishment reasserted its traditional attitudes. Recruitment of women into the Foreign Service remained at the suspiciously constant low level of about seven percent for more than a decade prior to 1971. Among the few recruited, the rate of promotion was only a third that of men as late as 1969, and only a scant few managed to move to the top. The number in the Foreign Service reached its lowest point at 4.8 percent. These facts, plus the dynamic resurgence of the nationwide women's movement in the late '60s and early '70s spurred women in the State Department to organize in order to redress the long-standing discrimination and to demand equitable treatment. The reform group, the

Women's Action Organization (WAO) represented not only the Department of State, but the Agency for International Development (AID), and the then-United States Information Agency (USIA)*, both agencies sending employees abroad and modeling their personnel policies almost entirely on those of the State Department.

When the reemergence of the women's movement provided a favorable climate for activism, I was fortunate to be in a position to help

"The members of the AFSA board that year were already known as the 'young Turks' because, contrary to past behavior, they raised voices of protest in an institution that prided itself on discipline and obedience."

found the WAO. In 1951, as a struggling artist just out of Berkeley with no funds to continue my studies abroad as planned, I had jumped at the chance to join the State Department for a foreign assignment. My first job was as a cryptographer which sounded intriguing and important, though I was quickly to discover its limitations. All Foreign Service employees must agree to serve worldwide; I requested Rome so I could continue my studies. Luckily, I was assigned there. In those days the *dolce far niente* philosophy still permeated Italy, but it stopped short at the gate of the US embassy. There the Protestant work ethic prevailed. I soon found that constantly-changing work shifts precluded any courses at the School of Fine Arts. This displeased me, but by then I realized that life as a serious woman artist would mean far greater sacrifice than the possibility of the prospect of spinsterhood in a career that would take me around

*Now the International Communications Agency (ICA)

the world. Even though the work itself was routine and boring, by that time the glamour, excitement, and wanderlust of the foreign service life had captured me. Assignments took me to South America and the Orient. Despite my growing sense that management and my colleagues in the Foreign Service did not particularly favor women, I decided to make the most of it.

In 1965, the Department of State assigned me back to the office of personnel in Washington as a Foreign Service recruiter, traveling around the country promoting the Foreign Service and interviewing young men and women candidates. This job was a turning point for me. It was then I really learned for the first time how disproportionately difficult it was for women to overcome the hurdles as candidates for the Foreign Service and subsequently as officers. Fortunately, being on home territory gave me the opportunity to become an activist. I realized how difficult achieving change from within was going to be. Working alone I found that my repeated efforts and suggestions were eventually ground down in the bureaucratic mill. My experience was not unique. Some of the finest women officers had expressed great frustration. One woman assigned to the department's equal employment office, and who consequently knew the rather grim statistics on the status of women in the State Department and the obstacles to promotion and change, expressed her hopelessness by resigning from the Foreign Service.

In 1968 the department's professional association, the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), began a thorough reevaluation of the conduct of our nation's foreign affairs in response to the challenges posed by the dramatic technological innovations of the electronic age. None of the AFSA recommendations dealt even peripherally with women's role and concerns. Some women expressed indignation at this lack of attention to their aspirations and potentials. One of them was Jean Joyce, then senior reports advisor in the bureau of educational and cultural affairs (CU), who told the president of AFSA that even in CU (where women were usually numerous) there were no women attending top policy-making meetings. No woman in CU was ever promoted to the position of

office "director"—the level at which such meetings were held.

At that time (1970), I was the lone woman on the AFSA board of directors and Jean's observations were passed to me. As the staff corps' representative on the AFSA slate, I was the only member representing the interests of the non-officer group which consisted largely of women—secretaries, communicators (cryptographers), and other clerical and administrative elements.

A majority of the members of the AFSA board that year were already known as the "young Turks" because, contrary to past behavior, they raised voices of protest in an institution that prided itself on discipline and obedience. They were interested in changing old patterns of diplomacy; they were tired of the "striped pants" image in an age of shirt-sleeve diplomacy. Some were liberals who had been active in the civil rights movement of the '60s and were becoming sensitive to human rights as well as women's rights. While the AFSA platform was not specific on women's issues, I nevertheless thought this would be an appropriate time to challenge attitudes toward the staff corps and women in general. The "young Turk" reformers promised me that they would work for more equitable treatment of men and women in the staff corps. I thus began to work with Jean and others to help organize a quiet revolution on broader women's issues. We found nine like-minded women from State, USIA and AID who were prepared, in spite of risks to their careers, to organize to do battle for the elimination of sex discrimination. Outstanding among them was Mary Olmsted, a high-ranking officer of the elite career service who agreed to serve first as our spokesperson and later, after we organized more formally, as our first president. Acting first in the summer of 1970 as the ad hoc committee to improve the status of women, we steadily added new members until by mid-August, we numbered about 50 from all ranks. Mildred Marcy, then in charge of women's affairs at USIA, was brought into our deliberations by Bernice Baer, one of the ad hoc committee members who early on had attempted to involve others from USIA in our quiet revolution. On the 50th anniversary of Women's Suffrage Day in

August 1970, Mrs. Marcy arranged for the ad hoc committee to meet with the State Department's deputy undersecretary for management, William B. Macomber, to state our case. We were fortunate to have such a man in such a crucial post at that time. Secretary Macomber was willing and able to listen sympathetically and to lend effective support to our proposals for policy changes.

We asked for an opportunity for a broad meeting of women employed by all three foreign agencies. At Secretary Macomber's request, the ad

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hoc committee worked very hard to gather the necessary information on women's status and needs for inclusion in each of the 13 departmental task force reports. When the results of our combined efforts were presented at the meeting, many management officers appeared taken aback by the repeated inequities which we cited and which they were forced to face for the first time. Of course no ready answers were available, but at last the unspoken issues had been definitively raised.

Our early successes and the now-obvious willingness of management to work with us led us to consider what kind of a more permanent organization would best serve our needs. Should we be a committee with AFSA, a group linked to the American Federation of Government Employees, or one that would be totally autonomous and represent women in all categories? The AFSA president, William Harrop, wisely agreed with many of our members that we should become totally autonomous. It was felt that our voice would be strongest as an independ-

ent organization. First, it was formally agreed that we should serve all categories of women in the three foreign affairs agencies. Other extremely important decisions were that we would be a voluntary organization within State/AID/USIA which could act independently and quickly; but also that we would work, not by sharp confrontations or militancy, but by dealing directly with management, putting on *and keeping* on pressure to bring about reform. Our target continued to be chiefly persons in the top management of the State Department—such as, for example, Undersecretary Macomber since, as noted earlier, State personnel policies set the pattern for the other two foreign affairs agencies.

By November 1970 the Ad Hoc Committee formally became the Women's Action Organization (WAO) of State, AID and USIA. During this early period of WAO one of the reforms we called for—and got—was an end to the ban on marriage for women in the foreign affairs agencies. This new policy subsequently permitted the foreign affairs agencies to employ working couples. Other reforms included a reduction of the inequity between allowances granted men and women in living arrangements and other perquisites, and a reduction of discrimination in hiring and assignment practices. For these initiatives, our ad hoc committee was given a management award in 1972 by the president of the United States. Mary Olmsted, our first president, received the coveted Christian Herter Award in the same year for "intellectual courage."

More and more of our proposals were adopted and old inequities righted, and our worldwide membership rose to over 1,000. We realized that we were being helped not only by a cooperative undersecretary for management, but also by the growing strength of the women's movement nationwide. Women's reform movements were being pushed everywhere, especially in the organized professions and unions, and were making front-page news almost daily. The State Department's politically astute Undersecretary Macomber realized he was facing a national, not a purely internal, social revolution.

Our work as an organization independent of AFSA was also facilitated by the establishment in 1968 of the Federal Women's Program by

the federal government. Agencies were directed to appoint a women's program coordinator to monitor and implement the program.

Finally, in August, 1970, and specifically in response to demands made on it by WAO members, the State Department appointed a part-time women's program coordinator, Elizabeth Harper, as well as an official committee. Jean Joyce, Alison Palmer and I were among those asked to serve on this first committee. By 1972, the coordinator position was made full-time with the title of special assistant to the deputy undersecretary of management. The first woman to hold that high-level position was an outstanding manager and feminist, Gladys P. Rogers. She recognized the tremendous value of a pressure group like WAO and, although a management representative, she worked closely with us in toppling the many blatant and archaic policies which discriminated against women. The timing of the mandated program greatly facilitated WAO's effort to press for change.

WAO's years since 1973 have been less dramatic since the most glaring inequities and practices, such as the ban on marriage, were eliminated early. Nevertheless, under a succession of committed presidents and with a growing worldwide membership, WAO has had plenty to do. Discrimination against women continued and persists today. Correcting such problems requires changes both in basic attitudes and in the power structure itself.

One particular field of concentration among the younger officers and their spouses, grouped in a department-sponsored organization called the Open Forum, was the demand for greater recognition of the professional (as contrasted with the "teapourer") status of spouses. WAO moved quickly to support their position. We also focused on the need to use the professional skills of Foreign Service spouses and initiated the first spouses' "skills bank" which Cynthia Chard, a Foreign Service spouse and WAO board member, both pioneered and carried out. This "skills bank" became the forerunner for the department's creation of a long-needed office, the Family Liaison

Office (FLO), to deal with the many special problems and stresses of Foreign Service families.

WAO has also worked persistently to secure less sexist treatment of women employees. Here, equality in women's working conditions at posts around the world is an important goal. For example, WAO has urged an end to exclusion of women officers from overseas all-male clubs where important information is often exchanged, and valuable local contacts made. Ambassador Robert Strausz-Hupé served as a pioneer in this area by influencing the all-male American Club of Stockholm to accept women members. Other such clubs have now opened their doors to women, including the American Club in Madrid, Spain where Ambassador Terence Todman declined the traditional honorary membership afforded to chiefs of mission until the club charter was revised to drop discrimination.

WAO has recently been stressing the importance of implicit and explicit bias in the Foreign Service's performance evaluation and promotion system. These performance ratings often institutionalized discrimination against women, and remain crucial obstacles to the achievement of equal opportunity and promotion. Lois Roth (ICA) wrote a paper for WAO entitled "Nice Girl or Pushy Bitch: Two Roads to Nonpromotion," which said, in part: For instance, "kind and supportive" remarks about women officers often perpetuate myths and values that get read in the promotion process as weakness, and that, in calling women pushy or abrasive when they are properly ambitious, men are using a double standard that does women in the Service great disservice and ultimately men in the Service dishonor.

In reflecting upon WAO's first decade and its achievements, we are aware that our very existence is unique. To my knowledge, and from my conversations with UN colleagues, in no other career foreign service in the world have women organized with men voluntarily to accomplish similarly—and equally needed—reforms. WAO in this sense might be said to serve as a model for the rest of the world. WAO is also unique in that, unlike some feminists in other fields, we have encouraged men to join us and to serve on our board of directors.

Reflection as we go into our sec-

ond decade (and the State Department's third century) must include the fact that WAO has had some failures, as well as successes, and has sometimes been criticized for its moderate position. For example, when the ad hoc committee was first moving in 1970, our early meetings included Alison Palmer, mentioned earlier. She chose, however, to pursue a militant course independently of WAO, and brought the first formal discrimination complaint against the Department of State. She charged discrimination against women in assignment to posts abroad which, as in her own situation, hampered career advancement. Her victory in 1971 was a landmark event for all Foreign Service women, resulting in a management directive categorically outlawing all discrimination in assignments. While this directive benefited all women employees, not all viewed Alison sympathetically when she subsequently became the moving force behind a class action suit on behalf of women Foreign Service officers. WAO, after long discussion, joined her in that 1975 effort, which caused a temporary split in our ranks. Some WAO members believed that we had taken a "confrontation-with-management" posture in violation of our "work-with-management" philosophy. Although the WAO wounds have healed, we remain a somewhat silent partner in the suit, which has now dragged on without a decision into its fourth year. Meanwhile, in all activities and contact with management, we continue to work "within the system" in a policy of moderation, using sustained pressure to achieve our aims.

As to WAO's shortcomings, we clearly do not have enough low-ranking women and minority women among our members nor enough high-level women. In some instances, facing women who have "made it" in the system can present special problems. Some who have been successful in invading the virtually all-male "room at the top" often help perpetuate male-dictated attitudes.

There are many people, men and women, in power points at the top echelons who similarly are not ready for equal rights. While it may not be within WAO's power to change attitudes and behavior at all levels, we are certainly greatly indebted to those few outstanding men and women

(Continued on page 6)

*Mary Olmsted, 1970-1972; Dorothy Stansbury, 1972-1974; Annette Buckland, 1974-1976; Marguerite Cooper King, 1976-1978; Barbara J. Good, 1978-1980; Jean Mammen, 1980-.

WOMEN IN THE FOREIGN SERVICE

from page 50

en who, despite their high rank, have given us crucial help and encouragement. For example, in my opinion, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was possibly, until his resignation in April 1980, the most enlightened and aggressive leader the State Department has ever had on the subject of equal employment opportunity. He came to the position understanding the problems, and one of his first tasks was to establish a special executive-level task force on affirmative action. WAO spent hundreds of hours helping this task force with studies and recommending remedies. Secretary Vance frequently took time, in spite of his tremendous other burdens, to review progress and problems with us.

One of the major accomplishments of the past two years has been the development of a new foreign policy directive on the worldwide status and rights of women, the first of its kind in the history of the Department of State. Ambassador

Marshall Green played a major role in developing this directive, whose first dramatic sentence by Secretary Vance reads: "A key objective of US foreign policy is to advance worldwide the status and condition of women." With the formulation of this foreign policy directive, one recently reaffirmed by Secretary of State Edmund Muskie, women's rights have now become internationally an integral part of the US human rights policy.

Improving the condition and rights of women, both in the United States and worldwide, is a formidable task; we are aware that we have embarked on a long journey where progress is hard to measure. But, looking back over the last decade, progress is visible while far from enough. When the Foreign Service women began to organize to safeguard and enhance their status in 1970, less than 5 percent of the Foreign Service officer corps was female; at the end of 1979, women constituted 11.5 percent of that elite group—proportionately over twice as many. While increases at the top levels were minuscule (due to slow career promo-

tion rates), female representation at the incoming junior level went from 9 percent to 20 percent in eight years—reflecting, I believe, reforms like elimination of the "no-marriage" rule and a more active recruitment of women. As to women in the department's civil service, while there has been no progress at the top, there has been a more than 6 percent gain among women in middle-level posts earning from about \$25,000 to \$50,000.

In the 36 years from 1933 (when the first woman, Ruth Bryan Owen, was named chief of a United States mission abroad) to 1969, 11 women have served in that top role (seven were political appointments, just as men have long been similarly chosen, and four were career officers). In the decade before October 1980, 26 women, one of them our first WAO president, Mary Olmsted, were named to ambassadorial posts (14 political and 12 career), a dramatic change reflecting, again, in my opinion, the positive impact that WAO and the women's movement have had on the United States foreign affairs agencies.



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