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UN Insider



Photo: A general view of the Vienna UN Conference. Credit: Robert Bosch AG/APA-Fotoservice/Schedl

Women's Path to Leadership: Are We at a Turning point?

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By Darline Giraud*

This is the fourth in a series of reports on the Vienna UN Conference (<http://viennaconference.net/>) from January 10-12, 2018, which discussed actions and challenges linked to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly 5 (SDG 5 (<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>)) and in the spirit of SDG 17

(<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/globalpartnerships/>). The Vienna Liaison Office (<http://acuns.org/category/projects-programs/liasion-office-activities/vienna/>) of the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) (<http://acuns.org/>) organized this Conference coordinated by Heather Wokusch (<https://www.heatherwokusch.com/>). – The Editor

VIENNA (IDN) – Women face unique challenges in attaining leadership positions. To determine multidisciplinary threads, a recent UN Vienna conference (<http://viennaconference.net/>) panel invited female leaders at different career phases to share their experiences and discuss means of creating opportunities for future generations.

Angela Me, Chief of Research and Trend Analysis at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC (<http://www.unodc.org/>)) characterizes her 20-year career at the UN as “exciting” and “exhausting.” Having faced the reluctance of male colleagues to take authority from her because she was a woman, Me advises those pursuing a career at the UN to “follow your passion, don't expect others to change your environment, take risks, initiate leadership.”

This proactive approach is echoed by Angelika Kiessling, Head of Corporate Communications at Robert Bosch AG, who describes best practices from her own 20-year career as: “taking opportunities, saying clearly what you want” and doing an excellent job. She emphasizes the importance of self-responsibility, defined as understanding one's sphere of influence and making a strong impact. She sums up the approach with “Love it - Change it - or Leave it.”

At the relative beginning of her career, Heba Essam El-Din El-Sayed agrees that self-reliance, education and a clear plan are fundamental on the path to leadership. An Egyptian alumna of UNODA's Women Scholarship for Peace: Global South program (<https://www.opportunitiesforafricans.com/un-office-for-disarmament-affairs-unoda-women-scholarship-for-peace-global-south-austria-vienna-fully-funded/>), Essam says that as a woman living in a patriarchal society, she has adopted the motto, “When people tell you that they don't understand what you are doing or you're not focused, say thank you and find a new audience.”

Kiessling seconds the importance of respect and empathy in communication, linking both to the transformation of corporate systems. To this end, her work at Bosch supports leadership roles to include cross-functional elements and collaboration across hierarchies. According to Kiessling, “open and frequent communication across all levels was and will be one of the key success factors of leadership” especially “in our era of digitization and social media.”

As the UN panel's chair, Klaus Unterberger, Head of Public Value at the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF (<http://orf.at/>)), highlighted the importance of media in promoting positive examples of women in leadership positions, not only on screen but also behind the scenes. He mentioned perspective change as important in enabling female empowerment.

Christine Muttonen took the point further, adding that similar change is also necessary in the political sphere. After being elected President of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Parliamentary Assembly (<https://www.oscepa.org/>) in 2016, for example, one of her priorities was women's empowerment in international politics. As Muttonen says: "Women bring a gender perspective to the table and can educate others about the needs of women and girls to ensure that these needs are met."

Other priorities of Muttonen's OSCE PA Presidency included the security implications of climate change, the use of culture as a peace-building tool, and the pursuit of closer relations with OSCE partners. In such geopolitical contexts, she emphasized the importance of making people aware of the stereotypes with which they address women. For example, in conflicts "women are not just war's victims" but rather their role can be expanded in areas such as conflict prevention, conflict resolution peace-building, and peace-keeping.

On the UN Vienna panel, Muttonen also emphasized the importance of management's supporting women with their career goals and structures enabling both women and men to balance family and work.

In this regard, Kiessling gave a related example on her own path to leadership. Years ago, after informing the Bosch Group in Austria that she was expecting her third child, she was nonetheless offered the position of Head of Corporate Communications. Ms. Kiessling and a top manager cooperated to find a timeframe suitable for her maternity leave so that she could take the job promotion opportunity.

Even in the best of cases, however, balancing work and family can be very challenging. UNODC's Me said that in her experience, the two left little room for anything else.

These personal testimonies and best practices on the path to leadership demonstrate that in order for women to attain leadership positions, there has to be willingness on the part of organizations to give opportunities and for women to take those opportunities. Having women in leadership also proves beneficial for the next generation of women. These reciprocal relationships are supported in an environment in which there is a strong commitment to implement gender policy with the goal of gender mainstreaming in all programs, in all areas, and at all levels.

*Darline Giraud, PMP - Founder of WUNABN: Women at the UN - Accountability Buddy Network: The network promotes and provides support for women who are striving to obtain a position within the United Nations system, and is currently conducting a two year case study on the UN hiring system from a gender perspective. Contact us at wunabn@gmail.com (<mailto:wunabn@gmail.com>) or find us on Facebook: WomenAccountabilityBuddyNetwork. [IDN-InDepthNews - 30 January 2018]



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