

WOMEN AND THE WORKPLACE

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Role of Women and Women's Organization

For more than a century, March 8 has marked International Women's Day — a global day celebrating the achievements of women and promoting gender equality worldwide. But as we pause to celebrate our many advances, we must also acknowledge how much remains to be done.

Two interconnected issues have emerged as priorities over the past two years: sexual harassment at the workplace and obstacles to women's participation at all levels of the workforce, including political representation. The 2017-18 explosion of the #MeToo movement across social media uncovered countless cases of unreported sexual harassment and assault, first in the U.S. and then in India. In both countries, it led to the resignations or firing of dozens of prominent men, mostly politicians, actors and journalists.

#UsToo — on India's #MeToo moment

It also prompted a range of public and private organisations to examine the internal institutional cultures surrounding sexual harassment, gender parity, and gender equity. Amongst them, the United Nations.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has been a staunch supporter of women's rights since his election in 2016, stating the need for "benchmarks and time frames to achieve [gender] parity across the system, well before the target year of 2030". In September 2017, the UN released a System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity to transform the UN's representation of women at senior levels. Today the UN's Senior Management Group, which has 44 top UN employees, comprises 23 women and 21 men.

In response to the MeToo movement, the UN recently conducted a system-wide survey to gauge the prevalence of sexual harassment among its more than 200,000 global staff. Though only 17% of UN staff responded, what the survey uncovered was sobering. One in three UN women workers reported being sexually harassed in the past two years, predominantly by men. Clearly, the UN gender strategy has much to improve, but then the UN, like most other international and national organisations, has a decades-old cultural backlog to tackle.

When misogyny reared its ugly head at a press meet

The inter-governmental UN is as affected by prevalent national cultures as are individual countries. Some might argue more, since the UN Secretary-General has to find a way through contending blocs of countries that support or oppose women's rights' goals. This is where UN research plays a significant role. As findings on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) indicate, many countries, including India, were able to substantially increase their performance on issues such as sex ratios and maternal mortality once their leaders had signed on to the MDGs. Tracking performance on the Sustainable Development Goals, a more comprehensive iteration of the MDGs, will again provide useful pointers for policymakers and advocates going forward.

At the same time, Mr. Guterres is to be commended for holding a mirror to organisational practices when it comes to sexual harassment or gender parity. Bringing the issue of gender inside the organisation, to reform its practices, will enable the UN to stand as an example of the rights it advocates.

Model institutions

How can organisations as large as the UN improve their internal cultures surrounding sexual harassment, gender parity, and gender equity? This issue has generated considerable debate in India, where political parties have begun to ask how they are to apply the rules of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 which lays down that every office in the country must have an internal complaints committee to investigate allegations of sexual harassment. With thousands of offices across the country, and barely any employee trained to handle sexual harassment, Indian political parties ask whether broader structures, such as district or regional complaints committees, could play the role of office ones. In this context, does the UN Secretariat's single window structure for such complaints provide a better practice? One caveat is that it does not apply across the organisation, so UN agencies, including the multi-institute UN University that aims to achieve gender parity at the director level by end 2019, still have to identify their organisation-specific mechanisms.

Clearly, we need further research before we can arrive at a judgment: perhaps a follow-up to the UN's sexual harassment survey that looks at complaints received and action taken. In India, going by past figures — since the current government has not released data for the last two years — the impact of the 2013 Act, one of the most comprehensive in the world, has been poor. Despite a large jump in complaints recorded, convictions have not shown a proportionate rise, largely due to poor police work. That is an obstacle which the UN, with its internal mechanisms, may not suffer from as far as first responses are concerned, but will certainly face as and when cases come to law.

Both the UN's early successes and the Indian experience offer lessons to UN member-states, few of which have gender parity or serious action against sexual harassment in the workplace. In the U.S., companies such as General Electric, Accenture, Pinterest, Twitter, General Mills and Unilever are setting and achieving targets to increase female representation at all levels of their workforce. This March 8, let us hope that companies worldwide pledge to follow the examples in the U.S. And that other institutions, whether universities or political parties, follow the UN example. Gender reforms begin at home, not only in the family but also in the workplace.

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