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Canadian Woman Studies

January, 2000

Gender and geography at work: the perils of perfect pluralism at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

BYLINE: Hyndman, Jennifer

SECTION: v.19(4) Wint'00 pg 48-53; ISSN: 0713-3235

LENGTH: 4980 words

Cet article s'en prend aux politiques de placement des professionnelles qui travaillent au sein du Haut Commissariat aux refugies des Nations-Unies, dans les zones de conflit et les camps de refugies. L'auteure a mis en evidence suite a l'analyse d'une politique specifique au personnel, les discriminations que cette agence impose aux femmes professionnelles, en fonction de la geographie et de leur sexe.

Feminism, for me, is the struggle for the equality of women. But this should not be understood as a struggle for realizing the equality of a definable empirical group with a common essence and identity, women, but rather as a struggle against the multiple forms in which the category "woman" is constructed in subordination. (Mouffe 382)

This article analyzes the politics of gender in recruitment for humanitarian staff working for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This is perhaps an unusual way to address "women in conflict zones," but one which examines the power relations inside a powerful organization which literally and figuratively places women in conflict zones and refugee camps to do humanitarian work. Analyzing the ways in which women and people from various non-western backgrounds are positioned with this United Nations (UN) agency exposes an interesting geography of gender and a gendered political economy of recruitment.

United Nations organizations aim to ensure fair representation of women and various nationalities among their ranks. The hiring of personnel is a very political process at UNHCR, in particular, due to added pressure that staff reflect the contributions of donor states and of countries hosting refugees. Personnel recruitment is a critical issue because the presence of women of various backgrounds in refugee camps and other UNHCR-sponsored relief efforts has direct impact on displaced persons accessing UNHCR's services. An adequate response must ensure a gender balance among personnel on the ground, but also a reworking of the ostensibly gender-blind terms of employment.

The research for this paper was carried out in 1994-95 as part of an ethnography of UNHCR conducted at three geographical scales: in Geneva, at the organization's headquarters; in Nairobi, at a UNHCR Branch Office; and in Dadaab, Kenya at the UNHCR sub-office which administers the three refugee camps of Ifo, Dagahaley, and Hagadera near the Kenya-Somalia border. The research pertinent to this paper involved interviews with senior management in Geneva in addition to a review of personnel policies and internal memos provided by interviewees. In Nairobi, further interviews were conducted, some in conjunction with a UNHCR mission from Geneva which was running a personnel-related consultation with all staff. Finally, in the camps, my research comprised less of interviews with staff than observations of the effects of certain hiring processes. UNHCR staff frankly shared their views of hiring practices and the terms of their employment.

By examining gender policies and politics at this level, fundamental dilemmas about gender equity and hiring are exposed. This article highlights issues that affect many UN and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in conflict zones, refugee camps, and among other groups of displaced persons. The opening section illustrates some of the recruitment considerations for professional staff at UNHCR. In particular, the implications of one hiring strategy aimed at increasing the representation of women on staff is analyzed. The strategy also proposes a distinctive geography of employment in which some staff rotate through time while others rotate through space.

United colours and genders: staffing the stats and status quo at UNHCR

UNHCR is under considerable pressure to meet a number of different interests and targets, including the hiring of a staff of competent professionals that represent the agency's donor base and major asylum countries (see Tables 1 and 2). Fortunately, both UNHCR's donor and asylum countries -- those who host refugees -- are among the 46 member states of UNHCR's Executive Committee: a strategic overlap of interests which is reflected in a breakdown of staff numbers by nationality. Qualifications and appropriate experience are scrupulously assessed by an influential board which meets regularly in Geneva to check applications, review candidate dossiers, and select recruits. How the qualified candidate is ranked has much to do with geography. Most evident is UNHCR's tendency to hire employees who reflect the donor base. In 1993, the U.S. provided \$299 million to UNHCR, almost one third of its budget. As of October 1994, UNHCR employed more U.S. citizens than those of any other single country, followed by staff from France and the UK. Of all regular UNHCR staff, 54 per cent come from European and North American countries, an indicator that the donor base is concentrated among a few industrialized states.(f.1) "We have basically a fairly narrow donor base, unfortunately" (personal interview). In 1993, all but US\$91 million of \$1,129 million donated to UNHCR was provided by 13 countries and the European Union (EU).(f.2) At the end of 1994, 95 per cent of total contributions to UNHCR were received from fourteen states and the EU.(f.3)

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Staff from countries of first asylum, which host significant refugee populations, are also represented among agency personnel. For example, Pakistan's hosting of Afghan refugees over the past 15 years has "earned" it two per cent of the 1994 staff total -- almost as many staff members as Belgium or Australia on the UNHCR payroll. Ethiopia, Ghana, and Thailand are other examples of refugee host countries represented by a noticeable percentage of UNHCR employees.

When asked if UNHCR is a multicultural organization in terms of recruitment, one senior manager replied that:

We're certainly multinational, we're multicultural but not completely. ... The whole basic administrative structure of the United Nations is based upon certain Western concepts. Now these tend to be rather universal, I mean most cultures embrace these concepts to some degree or another. ... But it is a fact that many of the administrative structures, practices of the UN are based on Western concepts." I'm not saying that one set of values is better than the other. ... But you see this type of thing happening in international organizations, where often people are talking past each other because they're ... coming at problems from entirely different ways. (personal interview)

Just as there are prevailing cultural concepts at work, so too are their prevailing gender norms. The same senior male manager acknowledges that "gender is important. Traditionally UNHCR has been a male domain; it reflects the world around it." The importance of frontline female staff at UNHCR is also recognized:

Dominant males grab more than their fair share. ... But at the same time ... you must be careful about social engineering ... there are societal structures here. Are you going to challenge the leadership role of (indigenous) leaders ... by saying, "you're not allowed to distribute the food; you do at home and you will when you go back home, but right here you can't. ...

This is what worries me a bit, now ... there is a valid point that we need female staff to deal with female refugees in certain societies, for example Muslim societies -- women spend their entire lives behind a set of walls, from family's home to husband's home, so you need female staff to have contact with these people. Equally, male leaders in a camp often won't work with female UNHCR staff. So, you have to balance gender to ensure access to the camp population and influence politically on the other." (personal interview)

At the time of my research, a proposal for staff recruitment was under review, one which highlighted gender, nationality, age, and qualifications. I asked a Division of Human Resource Management staff member, "who would get recruited in this new system?"

On the intake we have two considerations: gender and geography -- preference for women; our target is at least 35 per cent women; so

recruitment target is 45 per cent; recruit from widest possible geographical base ... a female French logistics officer will have a hard time, even though she's a woman, because France is heavily over-represented; a male logistics officer from Mongolia would probably have a better chance; qualifications are still very important ... a female candidate from Mongolia is golden, and if that female candidate from Mongolia speaks fluent English and French and has had two years of study at Exeter University, so has an international experience -- terrific -- that's the kind of person we should grab, so the geography of gender comes into this." (emphasis added) (personal interview)

"A female candidate from Mongolia is golden," but does she exist? And if she does, how did she learn to speak fluent English and French? Is she not the product of western imagination, of a perfect pluralism in which the statistically significant former subaltern speaks? (Spivak). As a culturally-distinct female with the qualifications of a universal subject, she embodies the multicultural tension between difference amid sameness. When pressed further about selection criteria, he argued that "the best recruits will be those with experience, ideally with NGOs." "How important is Western education?" I asked. "Do most people working here have a western education?"

I don't know (about the education of those working here); probably. ... It's not a Western education, it could be Eastern, but an international experience (that matters). The question of East and West is less important than that of provincial versus international. It's not a question of being Mongolian, but being exposed. (personal interview) Table 1 UNHCR Staff by Nationality, 1994 (permanent and short term)

% of total staff	
U.S.A.	10.5
France	7.5
United Kingdom	5.9
Italy	3.3
Netherlands	3.3
Canada	3.1
Germany	3.0
Sweden	3.0
Switzerland	2.9
Japan	2.8
Australia	2.1
Belgium	2.1
Pakistan	2.0

Countries with staff representation between one per cent and two per cent of the total include: Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Spain, Denmark, Ghana, Thailand, Bangladesh, Philippines, Norway, Uganda, Sri Lanka, and Austria.

Source: "Nationality Breakdown: Regular and Project Personnel Staff," UNHCR, March 10, 1994. Table 2 Donor Contributions by Country

US\$ million

U.S.A. 232

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European Commission	225
Japan	121
Sweden	81
United Kingdom	68
Netherlands	60
Norway	45
Denmark	38
Canada	26
Switzerland	21
Germany	17
Italy	15
France	11
Australia	11
Finland	11
Other governments	15
NGOS, UN and private sector	38
Total contributions	1,065

Source: UNHCR. *The State of the World's Refugees: In Search of Solutions*. (Oxford/NY: Oxford University Press, 1995): 255.

Questions of class, gender, and geography remain unanswered: "where does the golden Mongolian have to go to get an "international" experience and fluency in English and French?" The interview made clear that "Third World" institutions do not produce the same subjects, or employees, as Western-based ones.

In a "Note on Human Resource Management" prepared by UNHCR, several critical observations pertaining to gender distribution within the organization are made. Some of these are worth reviewing briefly:

1. As a member of the UN system, UNHCR needs to conform to system-wide norms. ... For example, there are requirements for appropriate staff representation by gender and nationality. (UNHCR 20)

2. ... Much remains to be done to reach the present UNHCR goal of women representing 35 per cent of the Professional staff. At June 30, 1993, 29 per cent of the Professional staff were women. As of May 5, 1994, the percentage had increased to 29.8 per cent, a figure that rises to 30 per cent in the field. During 1992, 34.2 per cent of the Professional staff recruited were women. During 1993, the figure had reached 37.8 per cent. ... In addition, DHRM [Division of Human Resource Management] adopted two strategies in April 1994, in order to reach the overall United Nations goal of 50 per cent female staff by the year 2000:

(i) whenever DHRM is asked to identify external candidates for recruitment, DHRM review qualified applicants and presents three candidates, two of whom must be women;

(ii) DHRM set a target for women to represent 40 per cent of all qualified candidates on the roster. (There are difficulties in some fields such as

logistics, where there are limited numbers of qualified female candidates). (UNHCR 11)

3. In order to improve the representation of women in senior grades ... (1993) guidelines had been prepared ... and include, inter alia, modified seniority requirements for eligibility for promotion by taking into account the time a woman has spent at a previous level. Women are thus able to move higher on seniority lists, thus enhancing promotion opportunities. In addition, percentage targets for the promotion of women were set.

While these measures are positive, they have not yet produced the desired result: the 1993 exercise found it impossible to meet the targets for the percentage of women to be promoted as there were insufficient women eligible even under the revised seniority guidelines. [emphasis added] (UNHCR 12)

The percentages have been meticulously calculated, and yet the document implies that female staff at UNHCR have somehow not cooperated. While every effort is made to include women at each level of the hiring process, little thought is given to the terms of employment and the reasons why the organization's efforts fail to keep women in professional posts. This approach implicitly pitches female employees at organizational targets, rather than adapting organizational norms and standards to suit female employees. In so doing, it risks producing a subtle form of sexism.(f.4)

The agency's emphasis on a "perfect distribution" in terms of recruitment should not prevail over consideration and remedial action related to the reasons they leave the organization. The "golden Mongolian" is the "intuitive, emotional Other" tutored in the rational, all-knowing ways of the West. She is a projection of both wishful thinking and "bean-counting" whose employment in the organization is desirable precisely because she represents the organization's target. Regardless of numerical gender and nationality targets, the organization of work and eligibility criteria for employment posts are the key issues of access and inclusion. Without their consideration, targets are unlikely to be met and the point of the exercise missed altogether. Assumptions about employees' geographic mobility, household composition, and willingness to conform to UNHCR norms are often gendered and exclusivist. The limits of perfect pluralism in recruitment and personnel management are exposed below.

Rotating through space and time

Consider the UNHCR rotation system. This system refers to the standard practice among professional staff whereby everyone must geographically shift locations (and posts) every three to five years. "I call it the "share the pain system". ... Promotions will increasingly be attached to willingness to be placed in the field" (personal interview).(f.5)

According to the senior manager interviewed, this is considered a fair policy because it applies to everyone and rewards staff for taking remote

field positions, but does it apply to all employees in the same way? A "share the pain system" implies a kind of macho martyrdom on the one hand, but more importantly, is such a system not gender-blind? If promotions are based on "willingness" to be posted at non-family duty stations in the field, does this note assume an availability based either on "single" status or someone who can look after the kids? Hardship posts, as these field positions are often called, are not necessarily gender-neutral. If an employed couple shares parental responsibilities, job and geographical considerations of both partners is important. There was no evidence of such coordination at UNHCR during my fieldwork, nor my tenure as a UNHCR employee.

A UNHCR personnel policy outlines "family considerations in the rotation system":

The conflict between family responsibilities and UNHCR's demands affects many staff members. This is especially true of women, who often find family responsibilities incompatible with the rotational requirements of their careers. Resignations by women who have acquired the skills and experience for promotion to senior levels represent a serious loss of essential expertise, and also impede the progress towards UNHCR's goal of increasing the percentage of women both in the Professional category and at senior levels. (UNHCR 7, 8)

Nowhere does this commentary analyze why women find rotational requirements incompatible with their careers. Moreover, it couches female staff's choices as a "loss" of expertise and one which impedes its progress towards perfect pluralism. Agency loss might be instead replaced with the idea of women employees' displacement; "displacement is that which is excluded or marginalized by the construction of a subject position" (Butler 155). Little consideration is given to families in which two professionals are working.

The notion of "family" at UNHCR is still very much based on a single income earner whose family, if "he" (implied) has one, can simply follow "him" to the next duty station. It is unlikely that UNHCR's assumptions reflect household composition in the 1990s, yet there is little formal recognition of this in human resource policy. There is no UNHCR policy which actively attempts to place two qualified staff who are married in the same location. While reasonable restrictions on the placement of married staff at the same duty station would prevent direct lines of supervision between them, no pro-active policy of placing such couples together exists to say nothing of common law or same-sex partners. What is more interesting is the family support for UNHCR staff working in remote locations. There are several measures to ensure that immediate family members are not too far away if the senior staff member is posted to a non-family duty station.(f.6)

There are ways for women to maintain a UNHCR career while raising children, but they involve costs of a personal and/or professional nature. One African woman working for UNHCR in Dadaab at the time of research was a

single mother with a daughter whom she supported financially but who lived with her sister elsewhere. Because Dadaab is a non-family duty station, she was hired on a contract that precludes support for dependents. She found that the separation and the general social dislocation experienced in Dadaab extremely trying. Her European boss, on the other hand, worked at a more senior level, and as a married man with two daughters, was entitled to house his family in Nairobi at UNHCR'S expense. Another strategy, employed by a female field officer who is a single mother of four children at UNHCR in Mombasa, is to apply only for posts in family duty station locations (i.e. safe places with access to appropriate schools). However, this involves professional costs in the long term, given that promotions are attached to service in difficult, "share the pain," non-family duty stations.

A major feature Of UNHCR'S work in the field in recent years has been the growth in the number of non-family duty stations. This has placed additional strains on the rotation system and staff members for whom there is a conflict between personal and professional obligations. (UNHCR 7, 8)

This singles out, in particular, female staff members for whom there is more likely to be a conflict between personal and professional obligations. While these employees may be men who would rather not be separated from their families and/or who require international schools for their children once they reach a certain age, they are more probably women who have child care responsibilities and who may have partners' jobs to consider as well as their own.

UNHCR has proposed serious changes in its training and recruitment procedures.

Our staff is aging, and this is a reality which has to be faced by the organization. What happened is that the organization grew very quickly in the 1970s, early 80s, and as a result they recruited people of the same age. ... The aging of the staff contradicts directly the concept of the rotation of staff ... (personal interview)

The changes include two tracks for UNHCR employees: career staff and field operations staff. Career staff are basically those already permanently employed by the organization. Field operations staff, on the other hand, would fill posts in "difficult, remote and non-family duty stations" (personal interview). They would be appointed on three to four year contracts, but told "that they have no long-term career prospects with UNHCR."

The "Broad Outline of a Revised and Expanded Human Resources Management System" explains that:

44. In this new scheme, UNHCR Career Staff will rotate through space, moving from duty station to duty station in senior roles. Many of these duty stations will be capital cities, where schools, etc. are generally available, making it easier for older staff members with family

responsibilities to rotate. ... At the same time, the requirement that staff serve in hardship or non-family duty stations for a period before promotion to the P.5 level will encourage staff to rotate such posts and provide their experience to the Field Operations Staff assigned under their supervision.

45. UNHCR Field Operations Staff will rotate through time, with some departing each year as their three or four year period on 300 series appointments expire, and with others joining each year to replace those leaving.

46. This two-tier staffing pattern is for the future, but can be started now. ...

48. Recruitment by DHRM to the non-career Field Operations Staff will take fully into account UNHCR policies, guidelines and targets concerning the recruitment of women until the target of 35 per cent of all professional staff is achieved or surpassed, and the recruitment of staff on an equitable geographical basis, including weight given both to donor countries and countries of asylum with large refugee populations. (UNHCR)

Permanent and semi-permanent employees are guaranteed job security under this scheme. Young recruits are assured none. Female staff will be hired with UNHCR targets in mind. Senior staff, who "rotate through space" will be assured careers and international schools for their children. Such a transparently self-serving flexible labour strategy is hardly innovative or change-oriented. UNHCR maintains that this two-tiered system of permanent and temporary staff will make it adaptable to an unpredictable external environment, which is one of the organization's main challenges. Nonetheless, it also aims to preserve the status quo for those who have jobs, rotating them through space, while hiring a temporary, more feminized, and ultimately disposable staff who are euphemistically "rotated through time."(f.7)

Nowhere did I encounter debate of the UNHCR rotation system nor of its conception of "family." The category of "family," the gender bias of the rotation system, and the distributions of "women" and "country" are all critical sites for potential policy changes, if UNHCR is serious about including women within its ranks. Changes may also address the reality of being permanently single in order to continue working for the organization. Incorporating women's socially, culturally, and economically constructed subject positions is a difficult task. It is made more difficult by the band aid hiring of large numbers of young professional women on short term contracts to improve the gender distribution.

The outdated assumptions of household structure and the organization of jobs at UNHCR are pressing issues if women and younger employees are to be included, and not simply represented, in the organization. UNHCR'S new proposal to employ a temporary (young and female) labour force to work in isolated areas clearly contradicts the professional participation of women and people from less developed countries. Given that these groups

represent the supposedly ideal type of employee at UNHCR, the policy is bitterly ironic. Only qualified and outstanding candidates will be selected according to "objective and transparent" criteria, but those select recruits who do get temporary jobs will, after five years, be left "out standing in their field." As temporary workers, they are less likely to enter permanent professional ranks at UNHCR, especially given the current oversupply of staff and paucity of posts within the organization.

Footnotes

(f.1) For short-term staff, the proportion is 58 per cent.

(f.2) Several European nations gave directly to UNHCR as well as through the EU contribution.

(f.3) The statistics cited in this article are based on classified information which was shared with me during the period of my research in 1994/95.

(f.4) Without minimizing the gains of affirmative action nor contesting its objectives, this new sexism is a product of equity policies and practices. It implies questions such as, "why, with all the extra measures and special allowances for female employees, don't women meet the mark? What is their problem?" This reasoning exists outside the binary opposition of liberal versus conservative arguments and points to what Mark Yount calls a "new sexism." Yount contends that old sexism rested on essentialized notions of women workers as inferior to their male counterparts. These notions of sexism were actively challenged by affirmative action programs which gave women and underrepresented minorities greater access to jobs from which they were excluded, but for which they were qualified. New sexism and its corollary, "new racism", are effects of affirmative action initiatives targeted, literally, at women and other groups. The new sexism speaks from the view that women were given the chance to prove themselves vis-a-vis such equity initiatives, and yet they have still not succeeded in increasing their representation. If women and minority groups don't meet the mark when given the "extra" chance, the blame falls on them. These arguably new kinds of prejudice stem from good intentions of liberal equity policies which aim to include underrepresented groups, but often end up in a quagmire of statistical distributions and bureaucracy. Recent arguments against affirmative action, particularly in the U.S., can be read as expressions of these new versions of sexism and racism, couched within a rhetoric of "political correctness" (see Yount). Arguments against affirmative action are also expressed as traditional liberalism, i.e. equality for everyone. The irony that traditional liberalism was created at a time when "universal" equality applied only to white men is lost in this characterization.

(f.5) Within this system, there are some exceptions for specialist and semi-specialist posts, as well as special consideration given to families with children in secondary education.

(f.6) Spouses who are not employed are eligible for a dependant's allowance. Education allowances for children and travel grants for their visits home are also available.

(f.7) See the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights for further discussion of the UNHCR dilemma of "investing in preparedness" (a financial risk) versus "waiting and seeing" (an operationally weak option).

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LOAD-DATE: September 5, 2000

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

CBCA-ACC-NO: 4872526

TYPE: Fulltext; Journal article

Gender and geography at work: the perils of perfect pluralism at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
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JOURNAL-CODE: 0582

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