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International Women's Day Be Bold for Change

by

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The creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the first institution of its kind, was a bold step. The change it has brought about in accountability for genocide, ethnic cleansing, rape and mass atrocities is even bolder. "Be Bold for Change" could not be a more fitting theme for the ICTY's last celebration of International Women's Day.

Women and gender are a big part of the ICTY's bold legacy. Two decades into its existence, the ICTY has been bold for change in three aspects dear to me: 1) combatting sexual violence in conflict; 2) achieving gender equality and 3) empowering agents for change.

1) Bold in combatting sexual violence in conflict

You may have woken up this morning to the campaign to end sexual violence in conflict posted on social media, or an article on your newsfeed about sexual violence as a weapon of war. And you were probably not surprised. Today, it is normal that sexual violence in war is discussed. But this was not the case some 20 years ago. What today is viewed as a global threat to peace which States, the United Nations and civil society must defeat, not long ago was considered inevitable collateral damage, a silent scourge, or, at most, a crime against honour.

The ICTY took on sexual violence from its first case. Judgement after judgement, the rulings of the ICTY, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and the courts that followed held that sexual violence in conflict could be a war crime, a crime against humanity or even an act of genocide. These rulings informed policy-making, emboldened global campaigns and shaped our convictions calling us to act. The ICTY was a catalyst for this bold and irreversible change.

The global clamour on sexual violence in conflict sprung from those who were voiceless. Offering them a forum, protection and support to speak out broke their silence. As the ICTY closes its doors, the lessons it passed on in prosecuting these crimes and in protecting and supporting witnesses and victims will help amplify more voices, and ensure that sexual violence in conflict does not go back to silence.

2) Bold in achieving gender equality

When I walked into this building for the first time, it was the eve of Women's Day, exactly twenty years ago. Louise Arbour was the Prosecutor and Dorothee de Sampayo was the Registrar. A few months later the President would also be a woman, Judge Gabrielle Kirk McDonald. I had walked into a new groundbreaking institution, where bold women were steering a bold change against a culture of impunity for international crimes.

Since its early days, the ICTY has always been committed to justice, but also to equality. I carried on the challenge when I became the Registrar. Today at the ICTY, almost 60% of our staff at the Professional level and above are women. We have exceeded the Secretary-General's gender goals year after year.

How did we do it? We targeted action where gender was under-represented. For instance, when women security officers were a small minority, we redoubled our efforts and doubled their numbers. We rejected stereotypes that certain jobs would be for males and others for females. I am very proud that the ICTY Chief of Security is the first female Chief of Security ever in the history of the United Nations. And from general services to finance, ICTY women occupy senior positions in areas traditionally dominated by men. But beyond targeted efforts and rejection of prejudice, the greatest tool to the ICTY achieving gender parity has been the simplest measure of all: recruiting the best person for the job.

Equality in the workplace, however, does not end with recruitment. It is about an equal opportunity to advance and thrive.

3) Bold in empowering agents for change

We put into practice the progressive workplace policies of the United Nations to allow all staff opportunities to thrive, both as professionals and as persons.

Cross-training, career transition services, special leave, flexible work schedules, working from home. Parents, of either gender, can take care of their kids without setbacks to their careers. We have created a work culture which is tailored to fit demanding work expectations and personal and family needs, without sacrificing either.

The ICTY ranked in the top five in the United Nations for staff empowerment, and for offering an environment free from harassment or abuse of authority, where staff are treated equally regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability - according to the recent UN Global Staff Satisfaction Survey.

When we are given an equal chance to be professionally and personally fulfilled, that is when we can become even bolder agents for change. Agents for change who have made it possible that a first of its kind institution would promote the bold change from impunity to accountability.

For over twenty years, the ICTY has been bold for change: it has combatted impunity for sexual violence in conflict, achieved gender equality and empowered agents for change.

We have accomplished this together - both women and men. All of us, armed with our own experiences and driven by our own inspirations. My inspiration was a woman who in the 1960s refused to choose between a professional career and a family. First, she returned to the books, and graduated in law, while taking care of four young children. Then, she became a barrister, when women barristers were few and far between. Later, she took on a case that would change Australia forever - with Eddie Mabo and others, they ultimately gained recognition for indigenous land rights. That woman also happened to be my mother. Examples such as hers compel us every day to go out there, be bold, and bring change for ourselves and for others.

Thank you.
