

UNITED NATIONS

SECRETARIAT



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INFORMATION CIRCULAR

To: Members of the staff

From: The Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management

Subject: GUIDELINES FOR PROMOTING EQUAL TREATMENT  
OF MEN AND WOMEN IN THE SECRETARIAT

1. All staff members have an obligation "to respect, in their attitudes, behaviour and language, the equality of their colleagues irrespective of their sex", as emphasized by the Secretary-General in his bulletin of 8 March 1977 (ST/SGB/154). The need for guidelines to alert staff members to the policies, attitudes, behaviour and language required to promote the equal treatment of men and women in the Secretariat was also pointed out by the Ad Hoc Group on Equal Rights for Women of Secretariat staff at Headquarters.
2. Staff members have always respected the rights and feelings of members of national and ethnic groups. Equally, they are aware of the need to avoid the use of derogatory terms alluding to racial or religious stereotypes and not to act on assumptions that discriminate on racial or religious grounds. Just as offensive to human dignity is behaviour or use of language based on sex stereotypes.
3. The need to follow the principles of common courtesy between people regardless of rank should be self-evident. However, especially in a large Organization like ours which has a well-defined hierarchical structure, that need is sometimes overlooked. Such violations of courtesy most often affect women staff members as a consequence of the fact that at present most of them are in lower grades than their male colleagues. For this reason, the following guidelines are offered to identify attitudes, behaviour and language that women staff members generally feel to be incompatible with their equal status.
4. When staff members are considered for assignment, periodic review or promotion, they are evaluated on the basis of their competence, efficiency and integrity as well as a variety of personal characteristics such as strength of character, intellectual ability, decisiveness, capacity for leadership, sensitivity, compassion and fairness. All these characteristics are found in both men and women and are not typical personality traits of either sex.

5. It is particularly important that prejudice be avoided in choosing assignments. Women staff members are as capable as their male counterparts of meeting the Organization's standards of efficiency and integrity, and its educational, linguistic and other standards. All staff members have professional expertise in their own fields and should be treated with dignity and respect for their abilities regardless of their sex.

6. Stereotyping should also be avoided in the choice of tasks assigned, and in requests, to subordinates. Many staff members resent deeply being asked to perform personal tasks which are not included in their job description or were not mentioned at the time they were interviewed. It is an abuse of the supervisors' position if they require staff members to make arrangements on their behalf unrelated to official business or to undertake personal tasks for them. Women should not be expected automatically to perform traditionally female tasks, such as fetching coffee, etc., when these tasks are not part of their official duties. Undertaking such tasks should always be voluntary and considered as a courtesy.

7. Staff members should recognize that the time, intelligence and initiative of their co-workers are worthy of consideration regardless of their sex or rank, and that other staff members may be under as much pressure of work as they are.

8. Secretarial and clerical staff members may find some other kinds of office behaviour to be inconsiderate: for instance, being kept standing, being kept waiting during long telephone calls, being given dictation for unnecessarily long periods or texts for typing that are not easily decipherable and not being given due appreciation for performing specially demanding tasks. While secretaries have primary responsibility for answering the telephone, other staff can also do so. For example, during lunch hours, responsibility for covering an office and answering the telephone should be shared.

9. Sexual harassment of either sex is unacceptable. Sexist remarks, jokes and innuendos are inappropriate in any circumstance.

10. Bias-free language is important because language reflects the attitudes and social customs of the user. Expressions or words that suggest male superiority should be avoided even if they are otherwise correctly used. Care should also be taken in addressing people, particularly in view of the current uncertainty as to how to do so without offence.

11. Since approximately 20 per cent of Professional staff and over 55 per cent of General Service staff are women, staff members in general should not be referred to as if they were all men and the pronouns "he" and "him" alone should be avoided when staff members of both sexes are intended. General terms should be used whenever persons of both sexes are included.

12. Some titles appear to exclude women and should be avoided if possible. While grammatically correct, "chairman" is now perceived by a number of persons as a biased term and, where possible, a term such as "president", "chairperson", "presiding officer", "moderator" or other similar neutral term may be preferable.

13. Since a woman's marital status is irrelevant in the work situation and since the use, in English, of "Ms." simply to denote gender is now well-accepted, the personal wishes of the staff member who may choose this form of address should be respected. When requested, this usage will be followed in the yellow pages of the United Nations staff telephone directory and in staff listings and other official communications and should also be followed in memoranda in English.

14. Many women resent some speech habits that seem to accord women less dignity than men. While it is clear that, in some countries, the use of the first name is quite common and does not indicate a wish to belittle a person or to be unduly familiar, the staff member's wish to be called by his or her proper name should be respected. Similarly, although the word "girl" is used by some people without intending to demean a woman, it should not be used to refer to one's colleagues.

15. The guidelines in this circular are brought to the attention of the staff in the belief that they will foster harmonious and productive working relations and that the Secretariat, because of its lofty purposes and varied composition, is in a unique position to provide leadership in eradicating attitudes, behaviour and language stemming from discrimination based on sex.

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