

Sexual harassment at the U.N.

By J. Michael Waller

There are many reasons to be cynical about the upcoming United Nations conference on women in Beijing. Most of those reasons have justifiably focused on the ghoulish treatment of women by the host government.

But even if the conference was held in Sweden, it would still be a travesty. The United Nations' own behavior contradicts the professed conference goals of improving women's lives. Its vast, opaque bureaucracy harbors a culture of harassment that preys on women with virtual impunity thanks to a climate of cronyism, diplomatic immunity, and fear.

Last February, *Mirabella* magazine ran an investigative story on the subject. Though *Mirabella* is not generally considered a source of hard news, its investigative piece by feminist writer Judith Warner, a biographer of first lady Hillary Clinton, is an astonishing piece of journalism. The big media failed to follow the scoop, and barely a word has been heard from advocates of the U.N. agenda in Beijing. It is time for Ms. Warner's investigation to be revisited.

Ms. Warner notes the irony: "The organization that has made women's rights a global concern for decades, the organization that has insisted on the importance of improving the economy of the developing world by enhancing the status of its women, and the organization that is holding its Fourth World Conference on Women this year is itself riddled with the most blatant sexism and sexual misconduct."

She isn't complaining about unwanted pecks on the cheek. Ms. Warner's description of three decades of widespread abuse at U.N. offices around the globe is shocking: a new human rights official promises the secretaries he will "go through" them in alphabetical order; a political affairs supervisor summons a female employee for an interview and masturbates as she talks about her job skills; and a recruitment officer invites potential female employees to lunch, where he fondles them, explaining he is checking their "suitability" to work at the United Nations.

"For many women the price of continued employment is sex," explains Ceceil Gross, a lawyer who

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retired after 25 years in the United Nations and whose last post was secretary of the Joint Appeals Board and the Joint Disciplinary Committee. "For some, sex is the way to better assignments, for others it's the price of avoiding a bad performance evaluation."

Many U.N. employees live in the United States on G-4 visas, which terminate if they leave employment in the organization. Some officials have capitalized on the dilemma this poses to females. Ms. Warner discusses two cases of sexual misconduct at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), whose executive director, Nafis Sadik, is playing a major role at the Beijing conference.

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Two UNFPA employees, a Moroccan woman and a naturalized Canadian woman from Algeria, complained of sexual harassment in 1992. Internal hearings were inconclusive. The women lost their jobs and were forced to leave the United States. Their supervisor against whom they had complained was promoted to head the UNFPA in Syria.

One of the highest-ranking women in the United Nations, Ms. Sadik showed not only indifference, but "outright hostility" to the plight of the two employees; some of Ms. Warner's sources say Ms. Sadik even summoned one of the women and "yelled at her for bringing charges" against the supervisor. Nafis Sadik's office refused to comment to Ms. Warner, and would not answer a query for this article.

Not only did previous U.N. lead-

ers try to cover up for alleged sex offenders, but so has sitting Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Ms. Warner describes the case of Catherine Claxton. "She accused her boss, Luis Maria Gomez, an Argentinean, one of the most powerful and well-connected men in the United Nations, of sexually assaulting her in his office, then retaliating for the fact that she'd rejected him by trying to eliminate her post," Ms. Warner reports. Yet Claxton could not be silenced: The nature of her contract and her American citizenship meant she could be neither fired nor deported. She made a brief media splash in 1991, and her appeal was inherited by Boutros-Ghali.

According to Ms. Warner, Boutros-Ghali "intervened repeatedly on Mr. Gomez's behalf and tried to intercept or embargo reports finding in Claxton's favor." Gomez finally resigned after Boutros Ghali's own appointed judge agreed with Claxton. Yet when the woman filed a civil suit against Mr. Gomez in the New York State Supreme Court, the U.N. secretariat "did what it could do to extend Gomez's diplomatic immunity."

Calling Mr. Boutros-Ghali's conduct a "travesty", a senior U.N. official said, according to Ms. Warner, "the message to the entire organization was that the United Nations is not serious about the issue of sexual harassment, and that message gives license to the U.N. and its agencies to turn a blind eye to it or pursue allegations of sexual harassment with indifference."

Mr. Boutros-Ghali initiated guidelines for complaining about sexual harassment in 1992, but reports indicate that female employees remain too afraid to come forward. They are guaranteed neither privacy nor job security; some have been subjected to smear campaigns about their character. Ms. Claxton's alleged harasser "reportedly received a severance package from the U.N. worth several hundred thousand dollars."

One-fourth of that sum was paid by the American taxpayer. But four years after coming forward, the victimized American U.N. employee still worries that she will be fired.

For these reasons alone, the upcoming U.N. women's conference would be a travesty regardless of where it was held. A congressional hearing about the matter, held at the same time U.N. officials profess their concern for women in Beijing, would graphically expose the contradictions about the conference as well as the world body itself.