

“Sitting at the table”

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DID YOU KNOW?

Since 1961, female senior women officers in NATO have organized conferences on an ad hoc basis to discuss the status, organization, conditions of employment and career possibilities for women in the armed forces of the Alliance. In 1976, the Military Committee officially recognized the "Committee on Women in the NATO Forces" or CWINFO. In May 2009, the CWINFO's mandate was extended to support the integration of gender perspective into NATO's military operations, specifically to support the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and 1820 as well as related resolutions. Additionally, the Committee was renamed "NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives". Photo below is taken on 2 June 2009, during the re-naming of the CWINFO.

HAVING BEEN A SHAPE NATO civilian at middle management level for more than a decade, I have experienced what it is to be the minority gender in a rather gender-lopsided environment. In my current role, I am the only female member of a division of 20 military and civilian staff. I try to "sit at the table", both figuratively and literally, in my attempt to deliver a

valuable contribution to the outcomes of my organization. The experience has been largely positive for me, as I find that the vast majority of my work brothers are educated and supportive. I also have no doubt that significant progress has been made by my foremothers and the Gender Advisors in enhancing levels of awareness, but there is still work to do.

In short, just when you don't expect it, a throwback comment or action catapults gender equality way back into the last century and, at best, leaves you scratching your head in bewilderment. Prejudices or thoughtlessness can cause untold harm to a woman's professional image and it can be surprising just where those sometimes unintentional, yet damaging, behaviours originate.



GENDER BALANCE IN THE WORKFORCE IS NOT ABOUT ACHIEVING COMPLIANCE WITH STANDARDS OR BEING SEEN TO BE AN EQUAL EMPLOYER. IT IS ABOUT ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE.

Improving the gender balance will go some way towards fostering a positive gender environment. The truth is that the progress made by the nations in encouraging females into the military may not be fully experienced by NATO (at least not at the strategic level) for several years. This is because, from my observations, many military men at SHAPE are more experienced and, well, older. A higher proportion of military women are on their way to SHAPE, but they haven't arrived yet.

As many NATO civilian posts are filled by retiring military staff, SHAPE currently has a predominantly male civilian workforce. While women are integrating our establishments as military members, most female civilians remain pooled in administrative, Human Resources or finance-related functions, with managers in core functions being men. There are hard-fought exceptions and on a positive note, we are seeing an improvement in gender balance. From my perspective, gender balance in the workforce is not about achieving compliance with standards or being seen to be an equal employer. It is about achieving excellence. We should not underestimate the negative impacts of gender imbalance on our collective performance.

I believe that maintaining a gender skewed environment may impact on the quality of our products. Gender imbalance is one of the components that puts organizations at risk of "groupthink". This psychological phenomenon, identified by Irving Janis from Yale University in the 1970's, occurs within a group of people seeking to desire harmony or conformity in results without critical evaluation of alternative viewpoints, by actively suppressing dissenting viewpoints and by isolating themselves from outside influences. Antecedents to groupthink include faulty group structure.

The concepts of Red Teaming or Alternative Analysis are central to achieving high quality military advice. In turn, they absolutely rely on bringing individuals with different frames of reference together to examine all possible alternatives. Any organization seeking to achieve excellence needs to challenge any antecedents to groupthink. In the context of a hybrid environment, NATO's adoption of a Compre-

sive Approach requires knowledge of factors covering populations across SACEUR's Area of Responsibility. More than 50 percent of these populations, and arguably the most vulnerable, are women. Comprehensive thinking requires comprehensive thinkers. We will increase the quality of NATO's products, give NATO a competitive edge in the face of its adversaries, and be more responsive to the demands of our populations by encouraging more females into the work environment at NATO.

However, there are serious obstacles that women have to overcome in order to get through the door, sit at the table and be heard. Some are societal, some are policy-related and some are due to sheer ignorance and prejudice.

From a societal perspective, there are subliminal preconceptions causing a negative impact on women in the workplace. According to a study entitled "*Why Are Women Penalised for Success at Male Tasks?*" published in the Journal of Applied Psychology, likeability and ambition are positively correlated for men (ambitious men are liked) and negatively correlated for women. Women cannot behave in an ambitious way if they want to be liked. This starts at the job interview and affects a woman throughout her career. Sheryl Sandberg's book "*Lean In*" discusses the social penalty that females incur when displaying aggressive and hard-charging behaviour for which men are continually applauded. In the workplace, taking risks and advocating for oneself are traits that lead to career development—but they are traits that girls, as they are growing up, are discouraged from exhibiting. This is why women in the workplace often do not speak up or sit at the table, choosing to take a back seat in meetings, literally.

Accepting that women must form part of NATO's collective thinking and that they are at a societal, not academic, disadvantage when it comes to playing their valuable role in the workplace, I would offer the following messages to four groups:

— **To men:** Support women in getting to the table. If you are in a position of authority, use it to establish a positive working environment.

Question your judgements and reactions, your own frame of reference. Think about what you say and what you mean and how it might reflect the behaviours of others. Think about who is sitting around the table, encourage women to be confident because they might just have the best contribution to make to your discussion, but don't feel comfortable enough to provide it.

— **To policy makers:** Make it easier for both genders to share the load at home, so that women can pursue their careers and sons will see their fathers taking an active role at home and respect their working mothers, becoming even better men. Make gender balance a priority that permeates through recruitment and development and into the culture.

— **To women scrambling through the jungle gym of a career:** Try to sit at the table. Question why you didn't raise that point or why you sat at the back of the room. Support each other. Don't sacrifice your likeability for success or your success in order to be liked. Find trailblazers and seek help if you need it. Take behaviours and comments at face value and don't overreact, but don't ignore bad behaviour either. Talk to trusted people in your headquarters.

— **And finally, to women who made it to the table:** Stay at the table and be the trailblazers and mentors for those behind you so that the path is cleared for them. This is not about positive discrimination; it is about making sure that the environment is a healthy, balanced place for both genders to make their contribution to our collective success. ♦

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