

How Wonder Woman exposed the Limits of Gender Mainstreaming at the UN

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UN Photo/Kim Haughton

Last October, the UN's Department of Public Information (DPI) announced that the UN was acquiring a new goodwill ambassador for the Empowerment of Women and Girls – linked to the Sustainable Development Goal on women's rights. This new ambassador was not real. It was Wonder Woman, a DC Comics superhero. She turned 75 last year, and evidently someone thought that a fitting gift would be an honorary ambassadorship from the UN.

Outrage swiftly followed from feminists within and beyond the UN, including myself, raising objections about the decision, best expressed perhaps in a petition that originated from within the UN that pointed out that a real life feminist woman activist might be more deserving of the honor, adding:

Although the original creators (of Wonder Woman) may have intended (her) to represent a strong and independent 'warrior' woman with a feminist message, the reality is that the character's current iteration is that of a large breasted, white woman of impossible proportions, scantily clad in a shimmery, thigh baring body suit with an American flag motif (...) the epitome of a 'pin-up' girl'.

It went on:

At a time when issues such as gender parity in senior roles and the prevention of sexual exploitation

Nations expects all its staff members to embody in the core value of respect for diversity (Concerned United Nations Staff Members).

At her official designation ceremony at the UN a few weeks later (October 21), there was a protest by UN staff – they wore white, carried signs saying 'real women deserve a real ambassador' and 'I am not a Mascot', and turned their backs on speakers. The staff protest was exceptionally unusual. Protests are banned inside the UN, and UN staff would not dream of turning their backs on the many real life tyrants that visit the New York premises.

In mid-December Wonder Woman's one-year term was prematurely terminated. The episode is trivial and far too much has been read into it. However, it exposes – or could be seen as a metaphor for – the precarity of the fight for women's rights. Around the world it seems that hard-fought gains in women's rights can be wiped away overnight. An archaic and distinctly hetero-patriarchal celebration of masculine preferences in gender and sexual relations is experiencing a triumphant resurgence in the ascension to power of blustering macho leaders, some of whom have rushed to revoke laws on women's rights or slashed their government's already small-ticket spending on gender equality. Within the UN, which styles itself the global standard-bearer on

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and abuse of women and girls is at the top of the United Nation's agenda (...), this appointment is more than surprising. It is alarming that the United Nations would consider using a character with an overtly sexualized image at a time when the headline news in United States and the world is the objectification of women and girls. The image that Wonder Woman projects (...) is not culturally encompassing or sensitive –attributes the United

human, and by (belated, sometimes halfhearted, but nevertheless legally firm) extension, women's rights, the Wonder Woman episode seemed to expose the insecure foundations of over 40 years of 'gender mainstreaming' – the project of making the promotion of gender equality foundational to all aspects of the UN's work.

Good intentions, awful timing, and outrage with ambiguous implications

The idea of appointing Wonder Woman was well-intentioned. The UN struggles to stay relevant and current, and is constantly looking for ways of engaging young people in its work. Women's rights have always been an extremely hard sell – so the employment of a female superhero with a capacity to rescue the oppressed at a time when there is more reporting than ever about mass abuses of women's rights, was seen by some in the DPI as a great idea. The communication capability of an empowering fictional character is significantly greater than what the thousands of pages on the Sustainable Development Goals can accomplish. The Wonder Woman arrangement was supposed to include production of at least one comic book dedicated to promoting women's rights and highlighting the UN's efforts – though to my mind that is an undersell; the 'Honorary Ambassador' title ought to have been met with a significant financial donation from DC Comics too.

I have to admit I might have made the same decision myself. In 2008 while I was the UN Development Fund for Women's (UNIFEM) Chief Advisor on Governance, Peace and Security I contacted several comic book producers to ask for advice on a comic or graphic booklet targeting newly-deployed military peacekeepers, to educate them on their responsibilities to prevent sexual violence in conflict. I abandoned the project because the stereotypically gendered and martial imagery in the proposals I received seemed to invoke and possibly invite the violence we were trying to stop. The medium was distorting the message. But beyond the pressure to find new ways to communicate the UN's work, there is pressure to find new sources of funding, especially from the private sector, to compensate for shrinking national development aid budgets. The prospect of partnership with a culture powerhouse and massive company like DC Comics were likely irresistible.

Inside the UN, the DPI fell on its sword and took the blame for the decision (kindly not mentioning the fact that initially a number of UN agencies, including UN Women, had been involved). Externally there were plenty of defenders of the appointment. Wonder Woman has a lot of fans and they scolded critics, arguing that they were being excessively sensitive, overstressing political correctness, lacking a sense of

humor, engaging in reverse 'body shaming', and failing to appreciate the feminist history and meaning of the Wonder Woman character (Jusino, 2016). A Muslim student of mine pointed out that the 'pin-up girl' reason for rejecting the Wonder Woman appointment is hypocritical and contradicts the feminist defense of women's free choice and self-expression. There were debates on whether Wonder Woman, a man's creation, represents 'the male gaze', or whether she has been successfully appropriated by women as a lesbian and feminist icon, or whether this 75-year-old is relevant to anyone anymore in a field now packed with self-possessed stereotype-busting female heroes, super and otherwise.

These critics of the critics touched on a problem that has bedeviled feminism – a puritanical streak that can work wonders to unite diverse women over issues like anti-alcohol campaigns or banning porn, but that sometimes finds itself in league with those who would protect – but perhaps also control – women and their sexuality. This protection-versus-choice dynamic is illustrated for instance in the major debate within global feminism on whether women who engage in sex work do so as victims of coercion, or out of choice. It has historically been easier to generate broad support for protecting women victims rather than for efforts to recognize their agency and amplify their voice and political power. The UN Security Council, for instance, has in recent years been more willing to take action to condemn conflict-related sexual violence against women than to challenge the legitimacy of peace talks that exclude women, or post-conflict elections with few women participating as candidates, or post-conflict recovery efforts that fail to address women's needs (Goetz and Jenkins, 2017). Another example was pointed out by Ambassador Cathy Russell of the Office of Global Women's Issues in Barack Obama's State Department, where she noted recently that conservative right wing interests are not averse to aspects of women's rights internationally such as stopping female genital mutilation, early child marriage and improving maternal health. Missing is women's political empowerment, participation in peace talks and economic planning, economic autonomy, not to mention of course reproductive and sexual rights, basically anything that enables women to avoid dependence on and control by individual men (Asquith, 2017).

The popularity of the 'victim frame' is something that feminists have exploited as an entry-point for efforts to advocate for women's rights, whether amongst the general public or in institutional gender mainstreaming efforts. Harvard law professor and self-labeled post-feminist Janet Halley and co-writers have witheringly dismissed such efforts as co-opted or sell-out 'governance feminism', an approach that they associate with gender mainstreaming efforts. They argue:

Merging into the mainstream can efface the feminist fingerprints on important governance projects and preclude intra-feminist politics about them. It can consolidate a particularistic, identity-based project, sometimes at the expense of alternative affiliations that ignore the siren call of victimization and identity as prerequisites for legal intelligibility (Halley, Kotiswaran, Rebouche, and Shamir, forthcoming).

In other words, mainstreaming feminism tends towards a reductionist simplification of gendered identities (usually into simple binaries) an irresistible pull to emphasize how men exploit or harm women; a focus on protection against male predation, but not a focus on women's power, let alone how women can harm each other.

In stark illustration of the 'siren call' of protection instead of power, the UN staff petition condemning the appointment of Wonder Woman generated an astonishing 45,000 signatures in several weeks in the autumn of 2016 (Concerned United Nations Staff Members, 2016). A much longer-running petition posted in between February and October 2016 by the Women's Major Group – a coalition of feminist environmental organizations – calling for the appointment at the UN in 2016 of a feminist woman Secretary-General, fell short of its puny target of 1,500 signatures (Women's Major Group, 2015-2016).

The Wonder Woman episode probably would not have triggered such visceral reactions had it not been for exceptionally unfortunate timing. Her 'honorary ambassador' announcement was made the day after the Security Council selected a man – the ninth in a row, to be the next UN Secretary-General, in a year where there had been more female candidates for the position than in all of the other SG selection processes put together. It was as if, with some of the most qualified women in the world eager to serve, perfectly capable of promoting women's rights in real life, the UN defaulted to a fake that

was more palatable to men, and offered this as a booby prize to the campaigns around the world demanding that for once, and as a sign that the UN was at last fitting itself for the 21st century, a woman should be appointed as the world's chief diplomat.

But that was October. At that point, those of us who had fought for a woman SG took comfort in the then very real hope that for the first time ever a woman and a feminist might win the US election.

On November 9th, the Wonder Woman appointment suddenly looked very different. An unabashed self-confessed sexual predator had won the U.S. Presidency. Hillary Clinton may have won the popular vote, but as a number of analysts have shown, Trump's electoral engine was fueled by the howl of both misogynistic and racist fury expressed by white men, resentful of feminism, liberalism, and any form of inclusiveness that erodes their privileged market position (Castillo-Diaz, 2016). At the very point at which feminists had expected a triumph in the fight for equality, de facto permission has been given for a reversion to a 'Mad Men' take on gender relations. How could it be that the American public in the 21st century was not ready to accept a woman president? How had the honorable demand for equal rights come to be condemned as special pleading and a whining form of political correctness? And at the UN, the Wonder Woman appointment suddenly seemed to sound a red alert about an unthinking reversion to an outdated last century version of patriarchy. Where was the feminist brain at the UN? What happened to four decades of gender mainstreaming?

Gender mainstreaming as a bureaucratic project

Gender mainstreaming is sometimes dismissed with derision as a 'jobs for the girls' project. While gender balance in staffing is certainly an important part of gender mainstreaming, the central objective is to reform institutional structures, training, cultures, incentive and accountability systems and yes, staffing, to meet the challenge of making gender equality core to what the institution does, whether it is poverty reduction, peacebuilding, conflict resolution, preventing ecological damage, fighting corruption, or promoting development. There are various models and even schools of gender mainstreaming with competing views on how gender expertise and feminist leadership should be located

within organizations – for instance a Gender Equality Ministry within the government versus a politically independent gender equality national commission with oversight powers, or a gender advisory unit in the CEO’s office versus a standalone gender and development office (Goetz, 1995). There are competing views on

access to the ‘assessed funding’ – the annual required contributions from UN member states – which are core resources that other agencies enjoy. It has to raise its operational budget (the costs of field offices and on-the ground programming) from voluntary contributions from member states, foundations, or the private sector.

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whether all staff can be trained to incorporate gender equality concerns to their work or whether a watchdog gender entity should provide expertise as well as hold others to account. There is constant experimentation with methods for ensuring that across an institution, all staff can be held to account for performance that advances women’s rights. Ideally, gender mainstreaming in institutions such as the UN is continuously scrutinized and informed by feminists outside the institution, setting up a constructive ‘in and against’ tension to help avoid co-optation and to keep the mainstreaming project relevant to the needs and perspectives of different groups of women.

Gender mainstreaming in the UN has been a struggle since its foundation (Bunting, 2011). Volumes have been published on the topic but in brief, the system that emerged over time ended up pitting four resource-starved, understaffed and low-powered gender units against each other, competing for funds and control of the gender equality mandate rather than mobilizing the whole of the UN to build women’s rights. On top of that, many major UN agencies established their own internal gender units and these saw no reason to be held to account by, for instance, the tiny UNIFEM. After years of feminist pressure (from the world-wide civil society coalition ‘Gender Equality Architecture Reform’ as well as from internal champions), in 2010 a General Assembly resolution called for a merger of the existing gender units into the UN Entity for Gender Equality and Women’s empowerment, or ‘UN Women’, which formally came into existence in January 2011 (UN General Assembly, 2010). This new entity has the same status as other major UN agencies – its Chief Executive is an Under Secretary-General and participates in all of the UN’s top decision-making forums. But UN Women is denied

In its brief life, it has annually raised far less than half of the USD 500 million it needs to meet its needs.

The Wonder Woman episode is a trivial sideshow in the context of the UN’s significant failings on women’s rights. Most egregiously, the UN has consistently failed to stop sexual exploitation and abuse by uniformed and civilian peacekeepers and by humanitarian staff in fragile states (Donovan, 2017). Internally, it not only has failed to meet a 1994 target of 50 percent women staff across all positions (currently women occupy about 22 percent of the most senior positions), but recent studies show that the rate of appointing women to senior positions had stalled and reversed in spite of claims in 2015 and 2016 by then Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon of significant progress (Yancopoulos, 2016; Landgren, 2015). Across most operational aspects of the UN’s work there have been complaints of inadequacy in integrating gender to planning and spending priorities. For instance, in spite of a system-wide target of spending a minimum of 15 percent of country funds for peacebuilding, no UN entity has met this unambitious target except for the dedicated UN Peacebuilding Fund (UN Secretary General, 2010; UN Women, 2011).

These serious problems illustrate the limitations of gender mainstreaming. UN Women simply cannot be everywhere and involved in every decision. Its Executive Director is uniquely positioned to undertake system-wide oversight on gender matters because of her seat on the Secretary-General’s Policy Committee (now called the Executive Committee) – in essence his Cabinet, dedicated to cross-cutting policy and crisis issues. This position is an extraordinary acknowledgement of the significance of gender issues to the UN’s work. Many agencies do not have direct representation but must cluster behind a selected representative. UN Women however was

given its own dedicated seat. But beyond the highest-level decisions, UN Women has to rely on each part of the UN to internalize the gender equality commitment in day-to-day work. It does this through negotiating -- with every agency across every sector of the UN's work -- a 'System-Wide Action Plan' in which agencies commit to goals and measures of progress to which UN Women holds them to account, often incurring resentment at perceived meddling. This is backed up by mandatory gender training (done by individuals on their computers, and considered a box-ticking exercise). In addition, as noted above, some entities have dedicated gender units or will designate a staff member the 'gender focal point' to liaise with UN Women as an add-on part of an existing job description. UN Women also continuously consults with women's movements through a global civil society advisory group as well as civil society contacts in each of its 80 plus country offices.

for emergent feminist graphic artists around the world, perhaps with a campaign employing the metaphor of Wonder Woman's superpower, her 'lasso of truth', to engage young women in breaking silences on abuses of women's rights.

Insiders at the UN have been silent on how the decision was actually taken, and the extent to which agencies beyond the Department of Public Information were involved, and the extent to which other options might have been negotiated with DC Comics. But there is indirect evidence that some doubts must have been raised. The October 21 launch event image of Wonder Woman differs from the familiar iconic full body image of her in a wide and firm stance, arms defiantly raised with her metal cuffs at the ready to deflect attack. The image on the poster for the event showed her head and shoulders only, with a new accessory, a flowing red cape, discretely covering most of her bust. This modification

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Gender mainstreaming as perpetual political engagement

Gender mainstreaming that relies on everyone buying-in is unlikely ever to work. Resentment is considered politically incorrect and is rarely voiced, but simmers deeply. Since mainstreaming is never going to be able to rely on goodwill, stronger means of holding bureaucrats accountable for gender equality in their work are needed. But resentment and sabotage was not the issue in the Wonder Woman decision. Just the opposite. Someone was trying hard and clearly meant well. The problem is that gender mainstreaming bureaucratizes what is at heart a political and transformative process, and the promotion of women's rights cannot be reduced to a check-list of actions taken and funds spent on women's rights advocacy and programming. Continuous engagement with feminist movement representatives is needed to fend off tin-eared mistakes. Perhaps this is where the Wonder Woman story could have ended differently, perhaps with a public discussion of the changing depictions of powerful women in popular culture, perhaps with a prize

was apparently designed specifically for the UN event, at the UN's request. It was of course at that moment of requesting a modesty paint-over that insiders of the UN ought to have had a 'hang on, what are we doing?' moment. If it was felt that sensibilities in some quarters would be offended, there must have been a debate about whether it was the right thing to do.

Critics on the outside -- including myself -- also must invest in soul-searching. Was the reaction to the Wonder Woman episode an expression of political correctness run amuck, with sensitivities so extreme to real and imagined slights that frank and honest debate has become an impossibility in policy and academic circles? Arguably yes, to some extent. We need to be extremely careful that such reactions do not end up paradoxically reinforcing extremely conservative positions, by narrowing public debate, and building a controlling and protective agenda that can silence women. Tony Blair, writing in the New York Times about the threats to democracy in new political landscape unleashed by the ethno-nationalist surge around the world says: 'outrage is easy, strategy is hard' (Blair, 2017). Like democracy, the pursuit of gender equality has to be constantly renewed. It is not a project

for a sole superhero, nor for a lone superagency at the UN, but requires collective engagement on the part of feminist women and men to bear witness to inequality and strategize for justice.

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