

## Nice Girl or Pushy Bitch: Two Roads to Nonpromotion

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Twice in the last six years I have served on USICA promotion panels, acquiring, thereby, a healthy respect for the wisdom of such peer evaluation systems. On the other hand, I also accumulated a number of impressions—albeit without benefit of statistics—touching on the way the system perceives and treats women officers, even during these times of transition and raised consciousness.

At the outset, I confess that my own consciousness in 1973 had not yet been sufficiently awakened for me to look for discernable patterns in Officer Evaluation Reports (OERs) written on women officers. I had been fortunate in my own promotion rate and had not at that time perceived any direct personal or institutional sexism in my colleagues' attitudes toward me. I had even suspected—wrongly I think now—that my own rapid advancement was owed in part to affirmative action on the part of promotion panels. Only later, as I became aware of the problems others were having and had my own direct confrontation with sex-biased attitudes, did I begin to note the double standard used in evaluating men and women. It was later still that clear patterns began to emerge. Thus, last year's promotion panels provided a model laboratory in which to test my hypotheses.<sup>1</sup>

In the class of middle-grade officers, which I reviewed last year, about 46 out of approximately 240 were women. With one out of every six officers female, the

25 promotions that resulted should have yielded advancement for four or five women. But in fact only two made it, in spite of the conscious and genuine commitment to affirmative action of my three male co-panelists, to whom much credit is due.<sup>2</sup>

Less credit is due, however, to the ways in which OERs on women are written. This is the key question: What kind of OER must women officers have to be promoted in midcareer? To my mind, an OER written about a woman must go to any lengths necessary to avoid citing the societal values and assumptions that can tag professional women as either pliable, helpful "nice girls," or women with "personality problems"—no matter how competent, talented, or superb they may be.

To illustrate: Of the approximately 46 files of women officers that were reviewed—hard as it may be to believe in 1978—only one would have been unidentifiable by sex, had no first name or pronoun been used. Only one—superbly rated, by the way—had a file that in no way mentioned characteristics bearing on her sex. The remaining files fell clearly into two groups: nice girls and bitches.

The first group comprised those terribly hard-working, conscientious women who burned the midnight oil (could it be that they were trying to keep up?), who willingly took on any task (possibly those their male colleagues judged less substantive?), who could always be depended upon, who were adept at personal relations, and who were always loyal to the post or the office (surely they never gave colleagues or supervisors any trouble!). Notwithstanding the faint and even lavish praise, this group was damned. Invariably the OERs managed to imply in some way or another that these women were compensating for lack of sharpness, managerial ability, and sub-

stantive knowledge through hard work and dedication. They never made waves, they were always an "asset" to the post or office, but these nice girls finished last.

The second group elicited subtler efforts from their rating officers. On the one hand, these women clearly "had it." They were skilled officers, well-grounded in their profession. They exhibited good judgment on substantive issues, drafted well, and could be depended upon to get the job done efficiently, sometimes brilliantly. But, with the one exception already mentioned, every woman in this group was marked down on personal relations as "too abrasive" or "too tenacious about her ideas and projects," or on supervisory ability as one who "will not delegate properly" and "can't get along with subordinates." Ultimately, they were perceived as "too aggressive."

I should note that, since rating and reviewing officers are usually senior to those rated, and since most senior officers in our Agency are men, the great majority of the ratings and reviews on middle-grade officers are written by male supervisors. It is tempting to offer the explanation that women in this category pose more threat to the male values that dominate our society than the "nice girl" types. Surely the attitudes toward women in USICA are no worse—if not even a little better—than the attitudes toward women that are institutionally and individually held in our society at large. But, even assuming that we start from a position of relative strength, a lot more effort will be needed to deal with this issue. If these impressions are valid, how can officers—female and male—deal with the problem?

As a start, I would urge that the Foreign Service agencies prepare rating officers' guidelines. One goal of these guidelines would be to raise the consciousness of all rating and reviewing officers about the problems implicit in sex-role stereotypes. Actual quotations should be listed as examples, illustrating how easy it is to undercut "womanly qualities" with faint praise and to stigmatize "male characteristics" in women.

Second, promotion panel precepts should contain a carefully written paragraph on this issue to remind panel members of the pitfalls of discrimination that make this kind of writing hazardous.

Third, through this medium and others, women officers, themselves, should be made fully aware of the damage being done to their promotion opportunities by references to sex-role characteristics in their OERs.

Above all it is women's own attitudes and actions that matter most and that will forge change. We must take responsibility to protect ourselves from sex-biased values in our OERs. We can only monitor this issue if all women are fully aware of the damage being done to their promotion and career opportunities by unconscious or conscious double standards in judging men and women. Earlier, I mentioned that among the women's files I saw, only one was totally without reference to female characteristics. USICA is a small agency, and I happen to know the rated officer. It will come as no surprise if I say she is known for her insistence upon this point: She has always gone over every detail of her OER with her supervisors, firmly and meticulously pointing out sex-biased remarks and suggesting they be removed even if they seemed flattering or advantageous. To her, it is a point of professional honor to be judged by the same standards that apply to her male colleagues. In the long run, her professional honor has stood her in good stead.

We must all adopt her method and speak openly, without embarrassment, and firmly to rating and reviewing officers on this question. The women's fight is ultimately tougher for the male to comprehend than for the female. Only we can help men understand that their "kind and supportive" remarks about women officers often perpetuate myths and values that get read in the promotion process as weakness, and that, in calling us pushy or abrasive when we are properly ambitious, they are using a double standard that does us great disservice and, ultimately, does them dishonor.

<sup>1</sup>This brief statement only discusses the rating, reviewing, and promotion panel process for FSIOs, since I have had no direct experience with FSS panels. I suspect, however, that the same issues apply to Staff Corps OERs.

<sup>2</sup>There were, of course, other factors. For example, a sizeable number of women in the class under review had been promoted very recently.