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WOMEN IN DIPLOMACY

Intervention by HE The Ambassador of Colombia

Clemencia Forero Ucros

The Honourable Penelope Wensley

Dr Fiona Jenkins

Professor Ingrid Moses

HE Mrs Annemieke Ruigrok, Ambassador of the
Netherlands

HE Mrs Naela Chohan, High Commissioner for
Pakistan

Dear Friends,

I wish to thank the Australian Institute of International
Affairs for organising this event in association with the
Australian National University Gender Institute.

It is indeed a great privilege for me to participate in
this Panel discussion and to share with you the
changes that have taken place and the achievements
obtained to advance the situation of women and

particularly women diplomats in my country, Colombia.

The Foreign Service was established in 1901 and the first regulations for its functioning were implemented in 1923. By those times, Diplomacy and the Foreign Service were totally dominated by men. And also by the upper classes of the Colombian society. Women could not undertake university studies. They were entirely dedicated to the family and the household. Nobody even dared to question this universal accepted pattern.

In 1934 women were granted access to the University in the same conditions as men. This was a great revolutionary change for those times. In 1935 for the first time a woman entered the Faculty of Medicine to become a medical doctor and in 1936 the first woman student joined the Faculty of Law.

Women in Colombia obtained the right to vote in 1954 and effectively voted for the first time in 1958.

The first lady to be appointed as Minister was Josefina Valencia, who occupied the position of Minister of Education from 1956 to 1957.

She was also the first woman to be designated Governor of a Colombian Province, the province of Cauca in the South of Colombia and the first one to serve in a legislative position as member of the Constitutional Assembly in 1954, which amended the Constitution in order to grant women the right to vote.

She also became the first lady Ambassador of Colombia when she was appointed as Permanent Representative of Colombia to UNESCO in 1957.

During the decade of the fifties, women worked at the Foreign Affairs Ministry in administrative posts and very few were able to occupy middle or high level

positions at the diplomatic level. It was unimaginable that a woman could travel abroad by herself and occupy a high diplomatic position in a foreign country on an equal footing with men. So the appointment of Josefina Valencia as Ambassador to UNESCO, was considered to be a very bold step which was received with a certain degree of scepticism.

1968 was a ground-breaking year. By the initiative of the President, the Colombian Congress passed a law establishing the Diplomatic and Consular Career. With this legislation, women started to escalate to higher positions of the Foreign Ministry. In the eighties, the first lady Deputy Minister was appointed. I had the honour to be the second lady to occupy that position in 1989.

Also since 1968 the diplomatic career was no longer restricted to the upper levels of society. A public exam to enter the career was set up, and the Foreign Service became more open and democratic in its

composition which translated to a more inclusive regional representation.

In the nineties there was only one woman serving as career Ambassador.

And only until the year 1991, a distinguished lawyer, Noemi Sanin, was appointed as Foreign Minister. It was considered a revolutionary step. From those times until now four more ladies have occupied this high position, including our current Foreign Minister, María Angela Holguín who has occupied this position for almost five years up to the present being the longest serving Foreign Minister in the history of Diplomacy in Colombia.

Also many young female professionals have entered the Diplomatic career, reaching a high percentage of the total of the career diplomats. Currently we have 19 women who have reached the position of Career Ambassadors, and 28 men in the same rank.

Inside the Ministry, the Vice minister and the Secretary General are women, together with the Directors of Cooperation, Human Rights, Integration, Economic Multilateral Affairs, Planning, Human Resources, Asia-Pacific and the Americas. Certainly a very impressive group, in charge of very relevant positions.

And let me tell you that this is not uncommon in Colombia. Women have advanced not only in government positions but also in the private sector. According to a recent report by the ILO, highlighted by the Washington Post on January 13, there are only three countries in the world where your boss is most likely to be a woman: These countries are Jamaica, Colombia and Saint Lucia. In the case of Colombia, 53 per cent of managers are women.

Nobody could have predicted such advancements. It means that cultural taboos have been demolished, and that education, together with a progressive

legislation, have been key to promote women in the different sectors of the productive activity of the country.

Women are increasingly following University studies and currently have reached more than fifty per cent of the enrolments at the national level.

My personal experience and challenges of the diplomatic activity for a woman diplomat

Let me begin by saying that I have been a diplomat for twenty six years, serving at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia, both in Colombia and abroad.

I graduated in Philosophy and Literature at the University of Los Andes, in Bogota, Colombia. The first part of my professional life was dedicated to teaching, for a period of ten years at the University where I studied. I married very young, at 23, and had two sons very soon. The advantage was that, as University professor, I could work part time and

prepare my lectures at home, of course counting on the support of my family.

After taking a Masters' degree in Political Science, ten years later, and with two more children, a daughter and a son, I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as Director of the Cultural Division and continued in the Foreign Service until the present, occupying positions both inside the Ministry and abroad, in Sweden, Geneva, Ottawa and currently Canberra.

The personal challenges of being a woman diplomat are huge, especially in terms of the family life and stability. It is no longer a matter of credibility, because currently women professionals are recognised as efficient. But it is a matter of striking the balance of a successful professional career and a dedicated stable family life.

When you are serving at home inside the Ministry, there is a lot of travelling to be done in almost all the

positions. When you are posted abroad, and your children are small, you can easily be transferred to another country and bring your children with you.

What members of the Colombian diplomatic service usually do is to enrol the children at the French school in Colombia which also has corresponding institutions in many countries, with the same educative system and methodologies.

But as children grow and reach college or university studies, there are more problems to be dealt with and frequently the family has to split, in order for them to continue their studies at home or in other places that might be convenient for the careers they have chosen to follow.

Many of you will find some difficulty in understanding why this is a concern for a diplomatic because in many countries families separate when children enrol

at higher education. However, in Latin America, especially Colombian families tend to stick together.

Another difficulty is the situation of spouses. In the times when women were first appointed to diplomatic positions, it was hard for spouses to follow them since they were not allowed to work in the receiving country. But fortunately, things have evolved and States began to sign agreements to allow spouses to work.

In our case, Colombia has signed agreements of this kind with more than sixty countries, including Australia.

The main challenges for women in the diplomatic activity are not only professional as I previously mentioned. They are also related to family life, child care, family stability, labour conditions for spouses.

Representing your country is a high honour that requires dedication, sacrifice and commitment for a

woman civil servant. On the other hand, the diplomatic profession has many rewards and satisfactions.

In professional terms, you contribute to the strengthening of relations that favour friendship and cooperation between countries and to the creation of people to people links. In personal terms you are given the unique opportunity of having a wider perspective of the world, and of providing your children and family with great academic and cultural experiences that will make them citizens of the world.

Of course for me as a diplomat it has been a great personal satisfaction to represent my country, at the bilateral and multilateral level, to contribute to the goals of or foreign policy and in personal terms to make friends around the world and to be able to meet wonderful professionals and colleagues.