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Diplomatic Dance: Grace and Power

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Washington salutes the growing ranks of female ambassadors.

By Christie Findlay and Roland Flamini



Ambassador of The Sultanate of Oman H.E. Hunaina Al-Mughairy with Farah Al-Hinai and HH Azzan Al-Said

The city is fast approaching an intriguing diplomatic milestone: its 30th female ambassador. Women heads of mission are still a minority in Washington's populous foreign diplomatic corps of close to 200 envoys. Still, it's a quantum leap from the mid-1990s, when the total number was five. From India's foreign service lifer Meera Shankar to Jamaica's spitfire Audrey Marks, there are now 28 women serving as their country's "person in Washington," the highest number ever.

Marilyn Sephocle, who for the past 15 years has run an annual Women Ambassadors Conference at Howard University, where she is a teacher, and a Women Ambassadors Foundation dedicated to the increase of female diplomats worldwide, believes that what she calls "the tri-Secretary effect" – three female Secretaries of State out of the last four incumbents – has made it easier for foreign

governments to send women ambassadors to the United States. This is done partly to show they are progressive – and perhaps in the hope that female ambassadors will have better access at State.

Singapore Ambassador Heng Chee Chan, the longest serving chief of mission in Washington, says the increase in women ambassadors started during the Clinton administration in part because Hillary Rodham Clinton was an activist first lady with a high profile. Sephacle adds another contributing phenomenon: as the number of women graduates increases in many countries, they are entering diplomatic service in larger numbers.

Inevitably, women ambassadors have attract a high curiosity factor. This helps in Washington's highly competitive political environment. Being a female in the job "opens doors for me," as Humaina Sultan Al-Mughairy, the ambassador from Oman, said recently. "People are curious to see me." Once inside, though, it's down to business.

"As a woman ambassador you get more access," Heng Chee Chan agrees, "but then you're on your own. If you don't live up to expectations – if you don't make your case effectively – you will be treated as any other ambassador. This is a very busy town, quite competitive, and you can't waste people's time."

But old assumptions die hard. Al-Mughairy recalls that when she was lobbying members of Congress to pass the U.S.-Oman Free Trade Agreement, visiting congressmen and senators would invariably make a beeline for the nearest male member of her staff, "certain that he was the ambassador. But it worked to my advantage. The member would be so embarrassed that I probably could have asked for the moon and gotten it, not just a simple vote."

As the numbers have grown, an informal network of women ambassadors covering all continents has taken shape. "We believe we have some strength in larger numbers," says Chan, who presented her credentials in 1996. "We meet for lunch regularly, and we invite speakers. There is more camaraderie, and we have created more access. But, of course, our issues are very different."

The fact is that a female ambassador in Washington leads a double life. First there's her day job, furthering the interests of her country. In the evening, she dashes home to act as hostess at her own dinner parties and receptions, having earlier discussed the menu with her chef, supervised the latest Costco run, and figured out which distinguished guest is allergic to fish, and that the papal nuncio shuns meat on Fridays. In other words, she takes on the role normally performed by the ambassador's wife. (Female ambassadors' husbands rarely accompany their wives: their careers require them to stay home.)

Some women ambassadors say the political atmosphere on the diplomatic dinner circuit has recently become more strained as a new divisiveness has undermined Washington's bi-partisan tradition. "In the past I host a dinner and invite guests from the two parties," Chan says. "I still do, but now I make sure they're moderates from the center."



Ambassador Claudia Fritsche of Liechtenstein

LIECHTENSTEIN AMBASSADOR CLAUDIA FRITSCHE

Claudia Fritsche set up Liechtenstein's first Washington embassy in 2002, just as she had established her country's first mission to the United Nations 12 years earlier. To help raise the profile of the tiny principality she represents, Fritsche (along with the then ambassador of Malta) launched an annual poetry reading by the ambassadors of small countries five years ago. The low-budget event gets a lot of attention.

NETHERLANDS AMBASSADOR RENEE JONES-BOS

An accomplished linguist and translator before joining the Netherlands' foreign service, she has translated Thomas Hardy's novel "The Mayor of Casterbridge" into Dutch. When she's in The Hague, this ardent biker cycles to the ministry of foreign affairs. Here in Washington, she loves Bistro du Coin and listening to great jazz at Bohemian Caverns and Blues Alley. Richard Jones, her historian husband, earns kudos for attending the International Club meetings for embassy spouses.



Ambassador Elena Poptodorova of Bulgaria

BULGARIAN AMBASSADOR H.E. ELENA POPTODOROVA

In a sense it's *déjà vu* all over again for Poptodorova since she held the post once before from 2002 to 2008. After two years of senior jobs in the Bulgarian foreign ministry in Sofia, she is back for a second term as her nation's ambassador to Washington. During her first tenure, she helped secure the release of five Bulgarian nurses falsely imprisoned in Libya and played a key role in negotiating Bulgaria's entry into NATO.

JAMAICAN AMBASSADOR AUDREY MARKS

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell, whose parents were Jamaican, turned out to celebrate Marks' confirmation during a June party at the Ritz-Carlton Pentagon City. She is an entrepreneur who has launched seven businesses, including Jamaica's first multi-payment agency and a 100-acre banana farm.



Ambassador Faida Mitifu of the Congo

CONGO AMBASSADOR FAIDA M. MITIFU

The longest serving of Africa's ambassadors, Mitifu holds a degree in biochemistry from the University of Kinshasa, a Masters from Auburn University, Alabama, and a Ph.D. in Romance Languages from the University of Georgia, where she subsequently taught French, African and Caribbean literature. She made the transition to ambassador in 1999. She has testified before Congress on the political situation in her complex and troubled country.

SINGAPORE AMBASSADOR CHAN HENG CHEE

En poste since 1996, one of Chan's best memories was the standing ovation she received from the entire U.S. Congress when, as deputy dean of the diplomatic corps, she entered the chamber to listen to an address by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown in March 2009. Her many books include a prize-winning biography of David Marshall, who played a major role in Singapore's independence.



Ambassador Meera Shankar of India

INDIA AMBASSADOR MEERA SHANKAR

Shankar is the second woman ambassador to Washington from her country, but the first career diplomat in more than 20 years. Between 1991-1995 she served in the Washington embassy as the minister responsible for commercial affairs. In the interim, relations between her increasingly powerful country and the U.S. have undergone a sea change; and she has said she finds official Washington more welcoming the second time round.

OMAN AMBASSADOR HUMAINA SULTAN AL-MUGHAIRY

The first woman ambassador to the U.S. from an Arab nation, Al-Mughairy is an economist with an extensive business background – and the opposite of the stereotypical Arab woman covered from head-to-toe in traditional garb. Before moving to Washington she spent eight years running Oman’s investment and export development office in New York. Most recently, she was involved in Oman’s efforts to negotiate the release of three American hikers held captive in Iran.

AUDREY MARKSCHRIE FINDLAYCLAUDIA FRITSCHEELENA POPTODOROVAFAIDA M.

MITIFUHENG CHEE CHANHILLARY RODHAM CLINTONHUMAINA SULTAN AL-

MUGHAIRYHUNAINA AL MUGHAIRMARILYN SEPHOCLEMEERA SHANKARRENÉE JONES-

BOSRICHARD JONESROLAND FLAMINI