

Rachel Mayanja



New York, 2004

Finding Balance

Rachel Mayanja

On August 12, 2004, then Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced the appointment of Ms. Rachel Mayanja as his Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women. As an assistant-secretary-general, the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women is tasked with the mission of promoting and strengthening the implementation of internationally agreed goals on the status of women, including the 2000 Millennium Declaration and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action.ⁱ The special adviser also serves as an independent voice and source of knowledge and support on issues that affect women and girls throughout the globe.

One of the first things that catches one's eye upon entering Ms. Mayanja's spacious office on the twelfth floor of a UN building is an assortment of dolls that stand demurely on top of a low cabinet along one side of her office. As her title suggests, Ms. Mayanja is passionately dedicated to women's empowerment, and her dolls, collected from around the world, remind her daily of the countless girls and women who need help from outside due to poverty, violence, human trafficking, or any form of oppression. Looking beyond the colorful traditional dresses

i. Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2000, the Millennium Declaration contains world leaders' resolve "to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger, and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable." The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action were adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995 in China to promote and accelerate progress toward gender equality and women empowerment.

that don these dolls and the beauty of cultural diversity that they represent, Ms. Mayanja starts her day with the humbling recognition that she carries the voices of silent girls and women in the international policymaking arena.

Childhood in Uganda

“Well, there was always someone to play with... and to fight with,” she says fondly of her large family, a broad smile spreading across her face. Born in Uganda, Rachel Mayanja was the second oldest of nine children. As the first-born daughter, she was expected to take on a leadership role in the family from an early age, helping with household chores and tending to the care and upbringing of the younger children. Back then, as is still the case in many developing countries around the world, girls were expected to do “certain things” in the household, such as subsistence cultivation, cooking, and doing laundry for the family. Although there was often much work to do, Rachel had a “fun childhood,” with plenty of opportunities to get into harmless mischief with her siblings.

Rachel’s family belonged to the Kingdom of Buganda, the largest traditional kingdom in Uganda, which comprises most of the country’s central region, including the Ugandan capital Kampala. The 5.5 million people of Buganda, known as the Baganda, currently make up the largest ethnic group in Uganda, representing approximately 18 percent of the population.¹ Rachel’s father was one of the chiefs in Buganda and was “extremely supportive” of his daughters. Contrary to Uganda’s prevailing cultural norm at the time, in which women were taught to “accede to the wishes” of men and—in rural Buganda—even expected to kneel down when speaking to a man,² Rachel’s father believed in equal treatment of boys and girls. Rachel recalls, “From the beginning, he convinced me that the sky was the limit, and if I wanted, with hard work, I could achieve anything and everything.”³ Such encouragement made Rachel feel “good about being a girl,”⁴ a rightful privilege that she wants to extend to other girls around the world.

When Rachel reached primary school age, her father enrolled her

in an all-girls boarding school run by British missionaries. The school was one of the best in Uganda, with students consisting primarily of the daughters of the ruling class. When establishing the school, the British missionaries consulted and negotiated with the King of Buganda to determine how students would be selected to attend the school, as well as exactly what they would be taught once enrolled. In addition to receiving a high-quality education, it was also important that the girls receive social and cultural training that would allow them to meet societal expectations. The girls had to be raised “properly,” and it was incumbent upon the school to teach them the skills to succeed as wives and mothers—skills they would normally learn had they grown up in their own families surrounded by other female figures. As a result, in addition to traditional subjects like math and science, the school trained the girls in a range of subjects related to housework and childcare.

Throughout primary and secondary school, Rachel was a bright student and excelled in all of her subjects, receiving top scores in math, science, and language arts. Ever since childhood, Rachel had wanted to become a doctor, as she had a deep desire to help people. Unfortunately, being an all-rounded top performer did not guarantee that she would be able to pursue the path she desired upon graduation. “As there was only a certain number of slots for girls to go into medicine or law or teaching, the girls that had scored well in science, but poorly in language arts, were directed towards medicine,” she explained. Girls like her, who had scored well in both, were directed towards filling any available open slots for the benefit of the other girls who had excelled in only one area. All of the slots for medicine were already filled.ⁱⁱ

“I wanted to be a doctor so much; I didn’t know what else I could be!” she says, laughing. “I just supposed that if I couldn’t be a doctor, surely, the next best thing must be a lawyer.” And so, by chance more

ii. Receiving good education was a key differentiating factor in Rachel’s upbringing in Uganda. Illiteracy is still common in Uganda, particularly amongst women; more than one third of Ugandan women were illiterate, as of 2002. This fact is exacerbated by high levels of poverty, with 35 percent of the population living below the international poverty line of US \$1.25 per day, as of 2001 (CIA World Factbook, Uganda).

than ambition, Rachel headed for law school. She enrolled in Makerere University of Uganda, where she was one of only four women in a class of 29 students. After receiving her law degree, she worked for a local law firm as part of an apprentice program. Rachel enjoyed her first job as lawyer enough that she did not immediately suspect that she would change her career. That is, until she had a chance meeting with the representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Uganda. Rachel was awestruck. "I was so moved when the high commissioner's representative spoke about his work that I was inspired to pursue a similar path by working for the UN. My professor encouraged me to get a master's degree if working for the UN was something that I seriously wanted."

Fortunately, for Rachel, a scholarship program was available for students in Uganda who wanted to pursue advanced degrees abroad. Rachel applied for a master's program in law and was accepted at both Harvard and Oxford universities. Rachel had never been outside of Uganda until then and had no idea which school to choose. Torn between the two top schools, Rachel chose Harvard University. "The Oxford program was for two years and the Harvard program was only for one year... I wanted to return home as soon as possible." Rachel's father and mother, who enthusiastically supported their daughter's education, welcomed her decision to attend Harvard.

Encounter with the West

Rachel vividly remembers her first car ride with her host family through the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and in particular, the culture shock of seeing hippies for the first time. The year was 1972. "I thought to myself, 'Why aren't they wearing shoes? Can't they afford shoes?'" She laughs, remembering the naïveté of her youthful self. An even greater shock during those first few weeks in Cambridge was seeing "white men cleaning the streets." In Uganda, the only white men she ever saw were all in positions of power; it took time for her to adjust to the idea that white men, too, could work in the lower rungs of society.

Overall, her experience at Harvard was a great one. She loved

the culture, the high quality of the education, and the people she met there. The school had a special program for foreign graduate students that enabled them to meet and socialize with cross sections of the student population, including first-year law students. Most importantly for Rachel, Harvard was where she met two of her best friends, one from the Netherlands and the other from Ghana. (Her best friend from Ghana, Sylvanus Tiewul, later became her husband.)

Rachel was firm in her desire to work for the UN and found that her two best friends also shared her passion; perhaps due to this shared passion, their friendship was able to deepen further. Rachel and her friends researched and spoke with professors to find out how they could work for the UN, carefully taking note of their advice on relevant courses to take. After much investigation, the three friends found that one of their professors had a contact in the United Nations Office of the Legal Counsel, just where Rachel hoped to find herself. With the professor's blessing, Rachel and her friends headed to New York City to meet with the legal counsel.

With expectations high, the trio had a promising first meeting with the legal counsel, who agreed to arrange for them to meet with the director of human resources at the UN. To them, it seemed that their dreams of working for the UN were about to come true. Hopeful and expectant, Rachel met individually with the director, as did her two friends. The director's reaction was not quite what she expected. The director was incredibly offended that Rachel had gone above her head rather than following the regular application procedure. The director argued that Rachel should have gone through the human resources office to search for job opportunities, not the legal counsel's office. None of them were hired. Lesson learned.

"Years later, when I was working for the UN—in the Office of Human Resources Management—I met the same director. I realized then that she was someone who took her job and the rules very seriously. She was doing what she believed was right." Now, as an experienced UN insider, Rachel sees the validity of the director's perspective. At the time, though, it was quite a setback, since Rachel was unfamiliar with UN procedures and had no idea what she was doing wrong. The trio returned to Cambridge, deflated from their

meetings but still persistent in their desire to work for the UN.

After applying again, this time through official channels, the first of the three to be accepted for a position at the UN was Rachel's boyfriend, Sylvanus. Rachel smiles as she jokes, "It may have been a little easier for guys." Now inside the UN, Sylvanus was able to let her know as soon as there was an opening. Rachel applied for a temporary position in the Division for Equal Rights for Women within the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs. This time, Rachel got the job and began what would prove to be a long, distinguished career at the UN. It was 1977.

Embarking on the UN Career

Following a short-term contract in the Division for Equal Rights for Women, Rachel got a full-time position as Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary-General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs. In her new position, Rachel developed insights into social issues of concern to the international community and forged important contacts, a key to success in any setting. She was also actively involved in the establishment of the landmark Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. With her abilities and dedication recognized, Rachel was assigned to various posts in the UN system, including the Office of Human Resources Management and the Joint Appeals Board / Joint Disciplinary Committee.ⁱⁱⁱ

Rachel subsequently joined the ranks of women pioneers who assumed new political and peacekeeping roles at the UN. She served in peacekeeping missions in Namibia from 1989 to 1990 (UN Transition Assistance Group)^{iv} and in Iraq and Kuwait from 1992 to

iii. The Joint Appeals Board considered UN staff appeals against administrative decisions, while the Joint Disciplinary Committee imposed disciplinary measures on staff that violated the UN Staff Rules. These mechanisms were replaced by the Office of Administration of Justice in July 2009.

iv. UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) was established to assist the Special Representative of the Secretary-General to ensure the early independence of Namibia from South Africa through free and fair elections under the supervision and control of the UN (UNTAG website).



Addressing the Security Council during its debate on “Women, Peace, and Security,” October 2009.

Source: UN Photo, Devra Berkowitz

1994 (UN Iraq-Kuwait Observer Mission).^v Today, women constitute 3 percent of military personnel and 9 percent of police personnel out of approximately 110,000 peacekeepers.⁵ However, in 1993, women made up only 1 percent of deployed uniformed personnel.⁶ The mission in Namibia was no exception, and Rachel was thrown into an overwhelmingly male environment. Although she was an international civilian staff member in support of peacekeeping activities, her professionalism qualified her to be rated alongside women peacekeepers who had “proven that they can perform the same roles, to the same standards, and under the same difficult conditions as their male counterparts.”⁷

In fact, her experience in Namibia—formerly known as South-West Africa—constitutes one of her most meaningful UN memories. At that time, South-West Africa had been under South African occupation since 1915, when German colonial administration ended with their

v. UN Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (UNIKOM) was established in April 1991, following the forced withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Its goals included monitoring the demilitarized zone along the Iraq-Kuwait border, deterring violations, and reporting on any hostile action (UNIKOM website).

defeat during World War I. When the supervisory authority over South-West Africa was transferred to the UN, South Africa refused to surrender its earlier League of Nations mandate and continued to illegally administer the country.⁸ International pressures for independence mounted, and in 1966, the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) began what turned into a decades-long armed struggle to liberate the country. This was followed by the renaming of South-West Africa into Namibia in 1968 and the UN recognition of SWAPO as the sole official representative of the Namibian people.⁹

In 1978, the Security Council adopted a resolution to settle the "Namibian problem." The resolution, known as the "UN Plan," called for holding elections in Namibia under UN supervision and control as well as cessation of all hostile acts by Namibian and South African troops, paramilitary, and police. Intense discussions between the concerned parties continued until 1988, when South Africa finally agreed to withdraw its presence and implement the UN Plan.

The transition to independence officially began in April 1989, and the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) arrived in Windhoek, the country's capital. Rachel was one of the 2,000 international civilian and local staff who joined the group^{vi} and the only female in the management team. As indicated by the 19 fatalities during the mission's one year of operation, UNTAG faced many dangerous situations. However, Rachel was determined to make sure that her gender did not in any way delay or deter the mission's activities. She remembers a time when the team received intelligence that fighting had broken out near the electoral district they were visiting. Martti Ahtisaari of Finland, who would later become president of that nation, was heading the mission as a special representative of the secretary-general (1979–1990). He considerably asked Rachel to decide whether the team should return to the capital. Rachel

vi. UNTAG's mission was to help achieve early independence of Namibia through free and fair elections. It also had to ensure that "all hostile acts were ended; troops were confined to base, and, in the case of the South Africans, ultimately withdrawn from Namibia; all discriminatory laws were repealed; political prisoners were released; Namibian refugees were permitted to return; intimidation of any kind was prevented; law and order were impartially maintained." Independent Namibia joined the United Nations in April 1990 (UNTAG website).

decided they should stay, even though the military personnel warned “there were no separate accommodations for women.” To Rachel, the Namibian mission was a place where women were allowed “to demonstrate their capabilities, competencies, and creativity” and showed “what they are capable of doing”¹⁰

Another inspiration that Rachel took away from Namibia was the leadership of Martti, which was characterized by “respect” for others. She recalls, “He was a big person -literally -quite a presence, with a big heart. He believed in bringing people together. He had respect for and was guided by the team.” Over the years, Rachel found herself incorporating Martti’s approaches to management. In particular, she has grown to believe that “respect for the individual and for one another is paramount... Many of the problems encountered at the workplace—such as harassment, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation—are really based on the lack of respect for others. If we all treat others as we would like them to treat us, I am sure that would go a long way to improving the work environment.”¹¹

After her successful performance in the peacekeeping missions, Rachel worked as Director of the Human Resources Management Division at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome.^{vii} According to Rachel, moving to FAO presented more challenges than she had anticipated due to its different organizational culture. She found FAO to be more centrally managed than the UN, as well as more fragmented in terms of staff representation. For example, general service staff, headquarters professional staff, and field professional staff at FAO each had a separate union, whereas in the UN Secretariat, all staff had one representative body.

Although it took time to adjust to these differences, Rachel was able to accomplish many things while at FAO, including the introduction of spouse employment, tele-working, and paternity leave. As a working mother of three young children, Rachel could understand the challenges of balancing work and life. Her innovative initiatives derived from both her own experience, as well as the

vii. Founded in 1945, FAO’s mandates are “to raise levels of nutrition, improve agricultural productivity, better the lives of rural populations, and contribute to the growth of the world economy,” with special focus on developing rural areas, in which 70 percent of the world’s poor and hungry people live (FAO website).



Consulting Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations during a Security Council meeting, October 2006.

Source: UN Photo, Devra Berkowitz

experience of dealing with numerous single fathers or men who supported their spouses' careers by sharing family responsibilities. She wanted to create a work environment that not only promoted work and life balance but also fostered genuine gender equality in terms of entitlements.

In 2004, Rachel's hard work and dedication were rewarded when she was appointed Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women. Internally within the UN system, the special advisor is responsible for enhancing the status of women and mainstreaming gender issues¹² into the substantive work of the organization, which is broadly broken down to peace and security, development, human rights, humanitarian affairs, and international law. At the time of her appointment, Rachel remarked, "I am glad to return to the UN and complete a full circle as I am back to where my UN career started—working on gender issues." She noted that the

position is different from other senior positions in the UN in that it is an “advocacy” position that requires speaking out on various issues that must be addressed.

As the special advisor, Rachel attached particular importance to empowering poor rural women in developing countries and preventing the trafficking of women and girls worldwide by giving them more viable economic opportunities. Another priority issue for Rachel was the landmark Security Council resolution 1325 on “women, peace, and security,” which underlined the vital role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. In October 2002, then Secretary-General Kofi Anan submitted a report as follow-up to the resolution “on the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, the role of women in peace-building, and the gender dimensions of peace processes and conflict resolution.”¹³ As the chair of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Women, Peace and Security,^{viii} Rachel has concentrated on helping to implement the recommendations of the report to ensure that women become full partners in peace and security negotiations. In order to do so, she urged governments to establish “a comprehensive framework” that focuses on concrete goals and timeframe.¹⁴ She observed, “More fundamentally, changes are required in the traditional perception of women as caregivers and caretakers rather than peacemakers. Investments are required in the educational sector to address and uproot prevailing stereotypes that lead to the exclusion of women from peace-building processes.”¹⁵

Bringing her human resources background to bear, Rachel notes that effective personnel management is critical for the organization’s optimal performance. Therefore, Rachel insists on holding managers accountable, while requesting them to give women the opportunities they deserve in an objective, transparent, and fair manner.^{ix}

viii. Established in February 2001, the Inter-Agency Task Force on Women, Peace, and Security follows up on the implementation of the Security Council resolution 1325. It consists of 22 members from UN entities.

ix. The UN Charter established six principal organs of the UN: the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, and the Secretariat. The UN family, however, is larger, encompassing 15 agencies and several programs and bodies (UN website).

High Wire Balancing Act

Juggling work and life presented many challenges for Rachel, who was quickly rising through the ranks of the organization. It became apparent that having a spouse at the UN “can complicate one’s life,” and Rachel kept her maiden name to protect the couple’s privacy. The couple also made a point of compartmentalizing work and family life. As a result, weekday lunch hours and evenings were set aside for work-related events; it was not unusual for the couple to sometimes go days without seeing their children, who would be sound asleep by the time they got home. The weekends, however, were strictly devoted to their children and their life together as a family. The heavy demands placed on them as working parents meant they had to do without personal “free hours” or entertainments, which New York City offered in abundance.

Although her husband did more than his share of housework and childcare, their frequent travel and work commitments made finding time for family, and for each other, difficult. Despite their best efforts to excel at both work and home, important things were sometimes forgotten. For example, due to the demands of their heavy schedules, Rachel and her husband had totally forgotten about Parents’ Day at their daughter’s school, where young Tonia was performing in a play. They returned home in Long Island late that night, only to find their daughter crying miserably. With remorse still detectable in her voice, Rachel says, “I will never forget that. I still apologize to her for it. She was the only student without a parent. Now, as an adult, she always tells me, ‘Forget about it, Mom, it’s okay,’ but I still haven’t forgiven myself.”

Balancing the conflicting demands of work and life became nearly impossible when tragedy unexpectedly struck the young family. When her first son was 13, second son 11, and her daughter 8, Rachel’s husband, her best friend and colleague Sylvanus, died unexpectedly. It brought tremendous grief to the family, not least because he was so young and loving. The premature death of their father was extremely difficult for the children, as they were entering their teens when all sensitivities become heightened. Despite the emotional numbness

that came from losing her husband, Rachel forced herself to cope by focusing on her children and did the best she could to blunt the ache of their growing up fatherless. Although her kids were young, they displayed an extraordinary amount of maturity in the face of adversity; they supported each other and survived together. This approach gradually took root in the family. When there were problems, they would sit down together and discuss them, with everyone acting like a “juror.”

“My children always check up on me,” she says warmly. “Sometimes they’ll say, ‘Mom, why did you say that? We read in the news that you said such and such in a meeting.’” Rachel counts her children as her most honest critics and supporters and smiles when she recalls how her daughter would sometimes veto a scarf she had worn for a public photo. Rachel’s oldest son studied business and is now involved in political work, while her youngest son majored in philosophy and is now working for a hedge fund. Career discovery for her daughter, Tonia, came in a more tortuous way because of her multiple interests and talents and the infinite possibilities available for girls of her generation and background. Initially intent on becoming a writer, she changed her focus to law but is now attending medical school. Given Rachel’s original childhood dream of becoming a doctor, her daughter’s ultimate choice seems ironically fitting.

Aside from juggling work and family, Rachel found herself juggling her gender and age with her career aspirations and capabilities. She is quoted as saying, “As a black woman, I have felt discrimination so many times in my life on account of my combined race and gender. Moreover... many times I was told by my supervisors, ‘You are too young, you can afford to wait for your promotion!’ It is very offensive and presupposes that a woman is somehow flattered that she is ‘young’ and should therefore be happy to be denied an opportunity/consideration. ‘Time is on your side;’ and this has followed me throughout my career. I have found this very insulting because, in the meantime, my male colleagues that entered the UN with me and looked just as young if not younger did not have to ‘wait’ to be promoted.”¹⁶ Rachel also confesses that some of the constraints she faced as a woman staff member came not only from men, but also from

other women; however, she was determined not to be “hindered” by negative comments or actions, focusing instead on “[doing] what I was hired to do the best way I could.”¹⁷ Like an insightful psychologist, Rachel understands that “[d]iscriminatory treatment usually leads to insecurity, lack of confidence, and eventually affects the quality of work. Therefore, I have always made a conscious effort not to allow such conduct to destroy me.”¹⁸



Meeting with former child soldiers from Uganda, November 2007.

Source: UN Photo, Ryan Brown

Rachel understands from experience that stereotypes such as “women are less able than men” still persist. Many women continue to find themselves having to do double the work to be proven the “same as men.” Girls should not be discouraged by such double standards but work harder to change them. “Unfortunately, only when we are so much more capable than men and we accomplish so much more than them—only then can we convince the world that the two genders are genuinely equal.” To Rachel, women still have a long way to go.

Looking Forward and Lessons Learned

Rachel is one of those rare individuals who have had the opportunity to develop her leadership skills very early in life. As the first daughter of nine siblings, Rachel had many occasions to make decisions, delegate responsibilities, and arbitrate squabbles. She attributes the foundation of her leadership skills to such childhood experience, which enabled her to learn firsthand how to manage different people in the confines of family hierarchy, social rules, and expectations.

As if she were counting off the letters of the alphabet, Rachel enumerates the essential qualities of a leader. "Great leaders are great listeners, with an appreciative heart. Leaders must know how to listen to the various voices of people, including their subordinates, and they must know how to demonstrate appreciation for others regardless of who they are and what their contributions. Active listening and active respect for each individual paves the way for a cohesive team." Rachel believes that leadership skills are developed through years of "conscious learning." Leadership is neither innately given nor acquired through technical training. It develops as part of the maturation process, through the people that you meet, and through the ordeals of life. Everyone has the potential to develop excellent leadership skills; the key is to identify and internalize those qualities that would help one grow as an individual.

In a multicultural setting like the UN, working with people whose beliefs and views are fundamentally different from one's own is inevitable. What is needed in this context is the willingness to accommodate diversity rather than impose a single standard. This calls for consensus building, in which everyone in the team is involved and can freely share their ideas. Rachel admits that consensus building is challenging, as it takes much time and patience, but it appeals to her as the best method for leading successfully. However, she cautions that a decision-making process should always be driven by concrete vision to prevent derailing by endless debate.

Rachel makes a point of giving credit where it is due and generously compliments her staff when deserved. She believes in the power of encouragement as a motivator and uses it felicitously. As a result, she

has seen many people improve their performance under her tutelage. “It takes confidence for people to perform optimally, and confidence only comes when their superiors acknowledge their contributions and cheer them on despite whatever weaknesses they may have.” Further, being a leader also means remaining firm and standing by decisions. It is, of course, necessary to consult and engage diverse stakeholders before making decisions, but once decisions are made, they should be enforced. “I feel strongly about discipline and order. We have to stay in line once decisions are made. Anarchy is not an option.” Her gentle appearance belies the firmness and adherence to order that makes her fearless about making tough decisions on issues that matter.

When asked how she handles criticism, Rachel replies that it is a necessary part of one’s development. She always examines the basis for criticism in order not to repeat mistakes. However, on occasions when she believes that her words and actions are “right” or justified, Rachel approaches the criticizer directly. Sometimes wrongs are corrected and misunderstandings clarified, other times not, but the important thing is that through this attempt at dialogue, a degree of common ground is forged and civility maintained.

Rachel defines success in leadership as creating a motivated and happy team, where there is harmony. Only then can the team produce effectively and make an impact. Success in life, on the other hand, transports her away from the complexities of the UN to the simple joys of family life. Rachel feels successful because of her kids and the unbreakable bond they share together.

Rachel’s job as a mother will never end, but she is anticipating retirement from the UN down the road. She has so many things that she wants to do afterwards that it hardly feels like it will be a retirement at all. Broadly, she wants to work with young women who are victims of violence, young girls who were kidnapped or sold to work the streets, and those who do not have choices in life because of poverty. Rachel wants to contribute to improving the lives of these women. Rachel recounts a story she read recently in a book by journalists Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn called *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (2009).

One of the stories in the book follows the life of a girl named Srey Momm in northwestern Cambodia, which is notorious for its many brothels. After working for five years in a brothel, Srey was “bought” by Nicholas for the paltry sum of \$203. Nicholas intended to provide Srey the opportunity to start a new life; with Nicholas’ financial help, Srey was able to start a meat stall in the market where her mother worked. However, after just one week, Momm voluntarily returned to the brothel because she was unable to overcome her addiction to methamphetamines. Apparently, brothel owners have administered this drug to keep their girls compliant and dependent. Srey was one of the countless girls snared in such a vicious scheme, unable to pull away despite her desire to do so.

Rachel agrees that, as with everything else, human rights work to save girls from unwilling prostitution is more complex than meets the eye. A more comprehensive “rescue package” is required to successfully transition girls to normal life. Rachel’s dream is to create a global foundation that serves girls and women in due regard for their specific situations and cultural contexts. Rachel also wants to fundraise for women entrepreneurs who are struggling to reclaim their rightful positions in society. “There are women who work as maids for seven days a week under brutal conditions and girls who are married off when they are just entering their teens. All of them need our help. We must give them the opportunity to explore life and realize their potential.” She looks back on her happy childhood and longs to provide to the world’s girls the same kind of security and opportunity that were offered to her.

She recalls how in Saudi Arabia 15 schoolgirls died in a fire in 2002 because they were prevented from leaving the blazing building without wearing proper headscarves and abayas (black robes); in Afghanistan, little girls have been poisoned and killed for daring to go to school even after the Taliban’s ban on female education (1996–2001) was lifted.¹⁹ Such horrific stories leave her aching inside and reinforce her determination to fight the discrimination and bigotry that crushes the hopes and potential of so many girls. Rachel encourages young girls and women to determine what they would like to accomplish in life and go for it, to persevere and pursue their

goals no matter how difficult. “Once they have their commitment, they shouldn’t be deterred by occasional obstacles or disparaging remarks. If there are no challenges on the way, accomplishments may not be valuable.”

In order to set and achieve a meaningful goal, Rachel declares, “First and foremost, one has to know oneself and be true to one’s belief, which for me are ‘perseverance’ and ‘the certainty that I am truly privileged’... This knowledge has obliged me to give and do my very best and keeps me going through my ups and downs and in all difficulties.”²⁰ As a woman who has experienced both the good and bad of life in depth, Rachel has acquired the “wisdom in living life one day at a time, which is linked to planning.” She advises, “Plan your life and be realistic about life, about what you can change and can’t change. There is no point for me to keep banging my head against some door that won’t open; instead, it is better to pursue those doors that are partially open. Maybe through them I can find a way into the other room... It is nice to be romantic about things, but we need not dwell too much on fantasies. We need to be well grounded and pursue our goals and use every opportunity to get to where we want to go.”²¹

* Finding Balance *

Rachel shows us that, try as we might, we cannot always separate our career aspirations from the many other obstacles, disappointments, and obligations that appear in our lives. Life can be messy and difficult, but it can also be immensely rewarding.

Although it can be hard to find balance when times get tough, finding balance is a part of what makes leaders great — having the ability to truly hear and value diverse perspectives and needs, while simultaneously seeking to achieve one’s purpose and vision in the face of life’s challenges.

Authors’ Note: On December 31, 2010, Rachel Mayanja retired from the United Nations after decades of dedicated service.

Notes

1. Background Note on Uganda. United States Department of State website (accessed January 2011).
2. Country Study on Uganda. United States Library of Congress (1991).
3. United Nations Women's Newsletter 8.3 (July, August, September 2004).
4. Ibid.
5. United Nations Peacekeeping website (accessed January 2011).
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Background Note on Uganda. United States Department of State website (accessed January 2010). Country Study on Uganda. United States Library of Congress (1991).
9. United Nations Peacekeeping website (accessed January 2011).
10. United Nations Women's Newsletter 8.3 (July, August, September 2004).
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. United Nations Security Council resolution 1325, paragraph 16 (31 October 2000).
14. Mayanja, Rachel. "Ensuring Women's Participation in Peacekeeping" delivered at the Tenth Anniversary of Security Council Resolution 1325 at the European Union (Brussels, 9 September 2010).
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Qazi, Abdullah. "The Plight of the Afghan Woman," Afghanistan Online (9 December 2010).
20. United Nations Women's Newsletter 8.3 (July, August, September 2004).
21. Ibid.