

## **INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2005**

### **Introducing Dame Margaret Anstee**

**Former Director-General of the UN Office at Vienna and  
the United Nations' first woman Under Secretary-General**



**BOOK PRESENTATION: 1200 – 1300 TUESDAY 8 MARCH IN THE ROTUNDA**

**and**

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS: 1500 – 1600 TUESDAY 8 MARCH IN THE IAEA BOARD ROOM (C04)**

#### ***Personal Firsts in Pioneering Women's Empowerment***

- First member of her family to go to university
- One of the first women diplomats in the British Foreign Service
- First woman UN field officer in technical cooperation
- First woman Resident Representative
- First woman Assistant Secretary General in a line post
- First woman Under Secretary-General
- First and only local staff hire who attained the rank of USG
- First woman to lead a UN Peacekeeping operation, including its military component

## Pioneering the EmPOWERment of Women in the UN

Interview with Dame Margaret Anstee

*Interviewer: Adrea Mach*

*15 February 2005*

**Q: Your life's trajectory has been quite remarkable—working your way up from a rural childhood in an English country village to build a unique career in the United Nations. Secretary General Kofi Annan has described you as “a true pioneer of the international community (with a career that) spans more than half a century's service across four continents.” To what do you attribute your personal and professional success?**

It is quite difficult to single out any one thing. If I had to put it into a few words, I'd say it's been a combination of luck, hard work and ... well, perseverance...or stubbornness or obstinacy, depending on how one looks at it.

*The sources of my success? A combination of luck, hard work ... and perseverance.*

Of course, none of this would have been possible if it hadn't been for my parents. I have to be grateful to them because I inherited from them a good brain and that was part of the luck of the draw.

They were also marvellous because, although they were of very modest means and I was a girl which, in our rural English village, was not considered very good material for further education, they supported me all along, made a lot of sacrifices and always encouraged me, especially my mother. As a result, I had a good education: through scholarships, I went to a very good girl's high school and eventually to one of the best universities in the world—Newnham College in Cambridge.

I *did* have a lot of luck along the way in the sense that opportunities cropped up, sometimes when the future looked rather dark. Perhaps I inherited this from my mother but, when opportunities cropped up, I was always ready to *accept* them, to dive in at the deep end and take perhaps some risks.

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Also, I was supported professionally in the early years by a number of men who were not of the normal macho brand of that time but really wanted to help a woman along her way.

**Q: The short bio in connection with the book review for “Never Learn to Type: A Women at the United Nations,” speaks of your career as one that “pushed the boundaries at every step.” Could you relate some of your greatest challenges and “personal firsts”?**

There *were* a lot of challenges along the way. The first of them was to get out of a village school and into a high school and then to university. I was the first member of my family, male or female, to go to university.

Immediately after the Second World War, things were improving for women: the British Foreign Service was opened for the first time to women at the diplomatic rank. There was a very difficult exam with a lot of competition. I took it as a joke; I *wanted* to do it but I thought I hadn't a snowflake's hope in hell of getting in ... but then I *did*.

And that was also a challenge because the British Foreign Service was very much a male bastion and at the tender age of 22, when one had not had much experience of life, it was quite difficult.

Then, later, when I got into the UN, I ended up in Latin America being the first woman field officer in technical cooperation and went on to become UNDP's first woman Resident Representative. Part of the reason why was because the Commission on the Status of Women told David Owen, the head of the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance (later UNDP), "Well, you've got about 25 Res Reps and they're all men. What about a woman?" I was the only person on the horizon who had any kind of relevant background so I became the first woman Res Rep. David Owen was always very supportive.

Later I became the first woman Assistant Secretary General in a line post (the first woman ASG was actually Ms Helvi Sipilä who was in charge of the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975) but I was the first woman appointed to deal with technical and political issues, previously considered a male domain.

Later still, I became the first woman Under-Secretary-General and came to Vienna in 1987 as the Director-General of UNOV at the time when it had greatly expanded functions entrusted to it. Then in 1992 I became the first woman to be the Special Representative of the Secretary General in a peacekeeping mission (Angola).

To go back for a moment to the beginning, I had started my career in the UN as a local staff member in the Philippines—I think I'm the only local staff member, male or female, who got to the rank of USG.

When I went to Colombia as #2 in the office of the ResRep, within a few months I became head of the office. Women didn't even have the vote in Colombia! And there was a lot of prejudice against women. Later, even though I had developed a respectable *Curriculum vitae*, governments were reluctant to accept a woman as the head of the UN programme, which was a sort of quasi diplomatic or ambassadorial post—so the UN always asked for the *agrément* of the Government. Often they had to send someone from New York to plead my cause.

Although they didn't want me to come and the first year was extraordinarily difficult because, like all women in these situations, you have to work much harder than a man to prove yourself—afterwards, when I finally left, nobody wanted me to go ... that was a true satisfaction.

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**Q: In exploring the patterns that have informed your life, you refer to one of them as "the perspective of a woman who, by chance, found herself challenging deeply rooted beliefs and traditions that had hitherto circumscribed a women's role in international affairs." And you said you learned to hold your own. Nevertheless, how did being a woman impact your life and your career? Were there ever times when you would have preferred to be a man?**

(Laughter) I realized at a very early age in my childhood in the village school that it was much preferable to be a boy. I was very much a tomboy until I grew to an age when it became difficult to conceal the fact that I was, indeed, female!

When I went to Cambridge, women were not allowed to be members of the university; that didn't happen until 1948, a year after I had left. We had to do the same exams; we went to the same lectures; we were marked exactly like the men but there was this tremendous prejudice so that one did realize that we were very much discriminated against.

It was difficult not to think that it would be so much easier to be a man—but what are you going to do? It's no use spending your whole life wishing you could be something that you couldn't be.

I *enjoy* being a woman. My philosophy was that, in my generation, one had so many disadvantages in being a woman that one might as well make the best of the advantages that one did have. I don't mean doing that to any unscrupulous degree but certainly a modicum of charm can help one on one's way. And I think that women are better at that than men.

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For instance, it was sometimes difficult when I was starting out in a country, but once you had made your mark and people had come to respect you, I suspect that it was much easier for a woman, for instance in discussing a difficult problem with some high authority in the government—the Prime Minister or the Foreign Minister or the Planning Minister—to say, “Your Excellency, don't you think it might be better to do this in some different fashion?” In the case of a man, it might be seen as much more confrontational.

**Q: Conversely, in retrospect, do you feel that your career compromised your personal life? Your choice of a life's companion? Would you do it again the same way?**

Well, of *course*, my career compromised my personal life. It was impossible in my generation to combine the kind of peripatetic career that I became involved in. I wasn't somebody who sat at headquarters; I was moved all over the world and lived in about 15 different countries. It was very difficult to find any man who would be willing to share that kind of life, particularly then.

Also, the UN system at that time was not at all geared to deal with women. You were just lucky to be there at all and couldn't expect to have a spouse or children as well. I'm very glad to see that, more recently, most of the UN has tried to make some concessions that would make it easier for women who go to the field to be able to have their personal lives.

In Latin America, where I spent the first nine years of my field career, you became a big fish in a small pond in some of these capital cities where social life was extremely restricted. I remember that in Colombia, some friends of mine couldn't understand why I didn't go and live with a nurse from the World Health Organization who was a good friend of mine; they thought this would be much more suitable than living alone. A woman living alone in Bogotá in the late 1950s ... well, people could speculate.

***A woman living alone in Bogotá in the late 1950s? ... well, people could speculate.***

A life's companion? Well, I was very lucky in the end because I did have a number of happy years with Sir Robert Jackson, a remarkable man. It was a very special and unusual relationship in that we were usually on opposite sides of the world. We wrote to one another every day; we had very much in common, especially our concerns about the UN. We worked together on the Capacity Study for the reform of the UN development system in the late 1960s and on the disaster relief operation in Bangladesh. So it was a very intense professional, as well as personal, relationship. I'm not sure that many people have that.

I didn't have children and that, in a way, is a regret. Nowadays a woman in my position would have been able to say, “I'm going to have a child” whether there were a spouse or not. I remember to saying to one of my bosses at headquarters sometime in the 1960s, “What would happen if I had a baby?” and he said, “Oh well, we would find a very discreet way of getting rid of you.”

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**Q: In terms of the overall organizational culture at the UN, do you find it the ‘bastion of male chauvinism’ that some allege it to be? If so, how have you dealt with it?**

When I started out, it was less a ‘bastion of male chauvinism’ than the accepted norm; it had never been done any other way. The whole idea of women getting into the act was a very new one which people had to get accustomed to. Some got accustomed rather faster than others and, as I said, there were some men in the UN who went out of their way to support me in my career because they did *believe* in women’s rights.

I think it’s a mistake to leave men out of the picture; I don’t think that women can get far unless there are men who are prepared to go along with this idea.

How does one deal with discrimination? Well, just do your best to prove them wrong!

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I am reminded of that lovely quote from Dr Samuel Johnson that “*a woman preaching is like a dog walking on its hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.*” People thought that a woman couldn’t do certain things. So you had to demonstrate that a woman *could*.

There were, of course, other problems. The term *sexual harassment* had not yet been devised, but it existed in practice. As a young woman in a man’s world, I had experiences of this kind that were quite hard to deal with. And there was nobody at that time to whom you could turn for redress. You just had to get round it the best you could.

**Q: Did you REALLY ‘never learn to type’—the title of your autobiography? Is this a tactic that would work well for women in today’s email/internet-ubiquitous world? If not, what might constitute an equally effective tactic for women, say in the IAEA’s nuclear physics-intensive environment where they constitute only 18.6% of the professional workforce?**

Well, no, I never learned to type properly. My mother was very concerned that I should be able to earn a living. She had very little money but she scraped enough together so that I could learn shorthand and typing. I didn’t get very far because then I went to university.

In my generation, as a woman, you could have all the degrees in the world but if you’d learned to type, you became somebody’s secretary. That happened to some of my very able friends who got first class degrees but became high-powered secretaries working for men who were often not as bright as they were.

***In my generation, as a woman, you could have all the degrees in the world but if you’d learned to type, you became somebody’s secretary.***

I was determined that would not happen to me.

“*Never Learn to Type*” is, of course, a dated title. It was my second choice title for the book. The original title I wanted was “*Never Say Your Mother Had a Jibber.*” It’s a saying my mother kept urging on me during all my childhood and even later; a local expression in these parts of Wales. The publishers complained that no one would know what a ‘jibber’ is. Well, a jibber is a horse that jibs at a fence.

***The original books title was “Never Say Your Mother Had a Jibber.”  
A jibber is a horse that jibs at a fence.***

So I spent the rest of my life taking my fences straight on; I still think of my mother now and certainly did in Angola when I was faced with the most *awful* challenges. I used to mutter to myself in the morning, “Never say your mother had a jibber.” I spent most of my life jumping over fences when perhaps I should have gone around them instead of falling into the water on the other side or knocking the top off.

You’re quite right. It is no longer so appropriate in this day and age: typing is even called something else now and has become a man’s thing as well with word processing and computers so typing’s been legitimized, as it were.

Today typing in the sense I meant has become a symbol for other things. A senior women in the UN said to me recently, “Of course, I know how to type; it’s not that. Whenever I’m in a meeting, it’s always I who am asked to make the coffee.” It’s the same sort of thing.

What would be an equally effective tactic for women today? Never learning to type is a kind of negative tactic, isn’t it? One would like to think of more positive tactics. I think it’s quite difficult for women in such organizations as the IAEA, which is so specific in the technical nature of its work. The best tactic would be for women who have the right kind of scientific and technical background to be able to occupy some of the key posts in the organization. I understand you already have a Deputy-Director-General, which is very good.

***The best gender empowerment tactic:  
Get women with the right backgrounds to occupy key posts in the organization.***

Even in a very specific and highly technical organization such as the IAEA, there are all sorts of other jobs and I don’t know what kind of posts are held by these 18.6% of the IAEA’s professional work force who are women. The main thing is for women to stick together (not using only aggressive tactics because that can build antagonisms) and keep the gender issue firmly before the eyes of the top management, using pressure that is carefully calibrated.

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**Q: Two of the themes of this year’s International Women’s Day are *security and disaster response*. In 1991-92, during your tenure as Under-Secretary-General, you also served as UN Coordinator of International Cooperation for the Chernobyl nuclear disaster aftermath and visited the site. In your autobiography, you wrote that you were “*assailed***



Touching the damaged reactor at Chernobyl ‘with a distinctly nervous smile’, 1991.

***by a sense of brooding menace, of an unseen, yet palpable terror lurking all around, the danger all the more terrifying because unseen.”* Considering the IAEA’s role as the world’s “nuclear watchdog,” do you feel that it is dealing proactively with issues such as *nuclear security and emergency preparedness*? Having experienced Chernobyl first-hand, how do you feel today in a world constantly at risk of nuclear terrorism?**

It would be invidious of me to pass any judgement on the IAEA because I've no direct knowledge of the details of all the work that is being done. I do follow events in the press and any other sources of information that are available and I have the impression that the IAEA is doing a very good job.

Having worked in the UN system, I am well aware that many people criticize what is done without knowing some of the problems international organizations have to face. For instance, in the nuclear field, there are so many difficulties: tensions between the *scientific and objective* concerns of an organization like the IAEA and the *political* concerns of the Member States who are, after all, the ones who call the shots as to what the Agency is to do. That is one constraint.

Another constraint or tension, if you will, is the whole problem of the energy crisis. Many people now think that perhaps there should be more nuclear energy. That would be less environmentally polluting but it raises all sorts of other difficulties because of the problems of ensuring that nuclear energy is produced only for peaceful means.

Turning to your question on Chernobyl, it was one of the really terrible and dramatic experiences of my life. I'm glad I had it though because I saw what awful things happened to the people there as a result of that reactor explosion.

How do I feel in a world constantly at risk of nuclear terrorism? I think it's very alarming indeed. I'm not a pessimist; on the contrary, I must be an optimist having survived 41 years in the UN system and having gone on working for them. Still, I'm quite glad I don't have children—no hostages to fortune for the future.

**Q: In 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Beijing Platform for Action identified twelve critical areas of concern for women: poverty, education, health, decision-making, economics, human rights, violence against women, conflict, environment, the media, the girl child, and institutional mechanisms to support gender equality. Which three are, to your mind, the most important in the long term? Which three stand the greatest chance of medium-term success in the context of achieving the 2015 Millennium Development Goal 3 to “promote gender equality and empower women”.**

Again, it's invidious to choose between them; they're all obviously very important. So often it's women from the developed world who are the most vociferous in this, along with women from developing countries who already have privileged positions. But we have to think of those women in so many parts of the world who simply don't have a voice. Looking at it from that point of view, I would say that the most important long-term goals are 1) the alleviation of poverty, 2) education, because you can't go very far without it, and 3) the girl child, because the girl child is so often almost an object of contempt in some societies.

***The most important long-term goals to empower women:  
alleviation of poverty, education and the girl child.***

In terms of medium-term success, I would plump for: 1) economics, 2) decision-making and 3) the media.

It is often when *economics* come to bear on a situation that women are given a bigger chance. For instance, during the Second World War, women were seen as essential to the survival of a nation and had to take on new jobs. Although men came back afterwards, women had attained a foothold that could never be lost and on which they were able to build.

Also in countries where there is a lot of poverty—I'm thinking here of African countries where I served for some years—women have a great economic role; for instance, women in West Africa who are the market women and are entrepreneurial on a small scale. To the extent that women can build up their own incomes, and we can assist them in doing so, it means that they can play a larger role in society.

But that is not enough on its own. It is important that there be more *women in decision-making* positions. Decisions taken by men can also affect the situation favourably but the more women one gets in higher positions, the better those decisions are likely to benefit women.

Unfortunately, there is sometimes a tendency for women in high places to adopt the “Queen Bee Syndrome,” but we have to hope that the more women there are near the top, the more likely there is to be progress.

I think *the media* also are tremendously important because they are the great force in the world today, which influence the policies of governments quite often. They're the ones who often establish the priorities: which disasters are the ones most needy, etc. as in the case of the Western Asia tsunami; which conflicts are of most importance.

<p><i>The most important goals for medium-term success in empowering women: economics, decision-making and the media.</i></p>
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So if we can get the media to highlight the issues of women, then that will bring the pressure on governments that is constantly needed if we are to keep on going forward.

**Q: The year 2005 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1975 *First World Conference on Women* held in Mexico City and the 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1979 *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. The words may sound nice but do we women, in fact, have much to celebrate?**

Oh yes, I think we *have!* ... although that perhaps is a generational thing. When I look back and then look at the position of women now, I sometimes think that the women of today don't know they were born. I'm not suggesting that everything is wonderful; of course it isn't and there's much to be done ... but we have really achieved a lot.

I don't have the statistics at hand, but there have been tremendous improvements in areas such as maternal mortality, nutrition, the number of girls in school—and many such things that affect the lives of women and girls in the poorer countries. But of course there are many problems still remaining to be solved.

There are many more women in what were formerly considered to be men's jobs: women at the head of businesses; women chief executives in large international companies. There is still a glass ceiling but the glass ceiling is higher and less of an obstacle than it was.

Although I've never liked conferences much, I have to recognize that this series of women's conferences has brought their issues to the fore. As for the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, one of its important features was the monitoring mechanism that was set up to see how governments were living up to the commitments they had accepted.

For the very first time, when I came to Vienna in 1987, I was in charge of women's issues and had the Division for the Advancement of Women, which served the Commission on the Status of Women, among my responsibilities. I used to sit in on the regular meetings of

CEDAW when governments were reporting on their progress. It was a fantastic experience: the women on the committee were a very fierce group of ladies!

***The CEDAW Committee ... a very fierce group of ladies!***

On one occasion, one Francophone country—which shall remain nameless—made the serious mistake of sending a man to present its report instead of the woman in charge of Women’s Affairs. Thinking he could inveigle his way by charming the ladies, he began by addressing them, “*Mes très chères Mesdames*,” etc. They made mincemeat of him! I thought at one point I was going to have to call the Medical Service to have him carried out on a stretcher!

There’s so much more that needs to be done everywhere in the world and the UN System should show the way by the manner in which it treats its own female staff. We have to persevere. I think one of the main problems now is that, in the UK and in other countries too, there are many men who feel threatened. So the main danger may be some kind of backlash.

***If I have made any contribution at all,  
it has been mainly through being a pioneer.***



A tense moment during the Angolan Elections, 29th–30th September 1998. This picture hangs in the UN. (UN photograph).

**Q: Especially through your 41-year long and diverse career in the United Nations, you have both participated in and influenced many of the key events around the world. If you had to choose one in which your contribution might most help the women of tomorrow, which one would it be and why?**

If I have made any contribution at all, it has been mainly through being a pioneer, showing that it could be done, so that afterwards no one could say, “*No, we couldn’t let a woman do that job; they aren’t capable of doing it.*”

Becoming the first woman to head a military peacekeeping mission in Angola was a major challenge. I knew that the mission was underfunded, undermandated and unlikely to be successful. I was very torn when I was given only 24 hours in which to decide whether to accept the post because I knew that if it failed, which it probably would, everyone would say that it was because it was a woman who had led it. But if I didn’t accept

it, then everyone would say, “*Well, you know, we did offer this once to a woman and she didn’t have the guts to take on the challenge.*”

***When I became ASG in New York, my department had 18% professional women;  
within one year I managed to raise it to 28%.***

But at the other end of the spectrum, when I was Resident Representative and visited schools in developing countries, I was always asking where the girl children were, giving them prominence. Little things like that can also have an impact. When I became Assistant Secretary General for the Department of Technical Cooperation for Development in New York, I set about trying to see that *able* women—I don’t believe in promoting *token* women—

were given a chance of promotion. I think you mentioned the IAEA having 18.6% professional women; well, in my Department, we had 18% professional women; within one year I managed to raise it to 28%.

Of course, it was an expanding operation and many of the newly recruited women were on extrabudgetary posts—but the issue isn't only line posts. The goal is to get good women in visible positions and show that they can do the work. Once they make this breakthrough, it has a multiplier effect!"

***The goal is to get good women in visible positions and show that they can do the work. Once they make this breakthrough, it has a multiplier effect!***

If I may recap my answer to your question, I think my contribution—if any—was twofold: a) pioneering, showing that it can be done; and b) whenever I could, promoting the interests of specific groups of women or of individual women as the case might arise

**Q: Today you can look back on a career full of incredible achievements: you have risen to a high public position, published books, travelled the world, and are everywhere in demand as a speaker and advisor. Still, do you feel that there's anything missing in your life? What does the future hold?**

I've been incredibly lucky in my career and happy in my life. Now, unfortunately, I have no close family left. But there are still plenty of things to be getting on with, I'm still very busy and work voluntarily for the UN, mostly in peacekeeping and peacebuilding. I'm engaged in helping to train military forces in UN peacekeeping techniques all over the world, in Asia, Africa and Latin America. I have also advised the President of Bolivia on the mobilization of international finance.

As you say, I am writing a new book, I travel, I give lectures; I garden, both in Wales and Bolivia; I walk, I swim and, generally, my life is very full.

**Q: In closing, Dame Margaret, is there anything you would like to say to the women of the Vienna International Centre or the International Atomic Energy Agency?**

I just want to say to all of you: be of good courage and go forward. The future can only get better. And I admire very much what all of you are trying to do in order to improve the lot of women, both in your organizations and in general.

***Be of good courage and go forward.  
The future can only get better.***

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