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Are women paying a higher price for a UN career?



by [Henrik Ryden](#) on June 15, 2017

In late 2016 Impactpool sent a survey to 1672 former and current United Nations staff members. All candidates had started their career at a junior staff position (P1 or P2) in the past 25 years. With this survey, we wanted to find out what successful UN staff members have in common, and we discovered there is a lot.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY IMPACTPOOL WHITE PAPERS



Executive Summary

In late 2016 Impactpool sent a survey to former and current United Nations staff members. All candidates had started their career at a junior staff position (P1 or P2) in the past 25 years. With this survey, we wanted to find out what successful UN staff members have in common, and we discovered there is a lot.

The survey was sent out 1672 respondents and had a high response rate 10.2% (172 responses received). As a result, it generated a large data set with high statistical significance. With a confidence level of 95%, the calculated margin of error is 7.08%.

The survey consisted of 58.3% female and 41.7% male respondents. The respondent's originated from 21 different member states of the United Nations.

The results of the questions confirmed many pre-existing ideas, but it also offered some insights into an unfortunate discrepancy. The survey shows that women and men are equally well prepared when entering the UN, but there was a drastic discrepancy in career

progression among men and women. In fact, it was found that women who left the UN progressed further in their career paths than those who stayed.

Our study also shows that the young talents recruited to the UN are highly prepared and educated.

- The average junior UN staff members have skills in more than 3 languages;
- As many as 99% of the UN staff members have a Master’s Degree or higher;
- On average, successful female candidates had 2.3 relevant professional jobs before taking on a junior position at the UN. Men had 2.5 relevant jobs before their first assignment.
- 6 out of 10 staff worked in International Development or Humanitarian Aid before applying;
- 1 out of 5 had some form of Hardship experience before starting.

Although these talents probably are the best and brightest (at the commencement day), our study shows dark clouds on the sky. And unfortunately, these clouds are darker for women.

- Studying professionals aged 40 and over, only 45.7% of the women have children, in contrast to 84.3% of the men.
- The divorce rate among women UN staff is much higher compared to men;
- Also, more women are unmarried/singles than men;
- And more women leave the UN of family reasons, but family reason is also a big reason why men leave:

Impactpool has profound experience in working with sourcing targeting women and **we have published several articles how you can improve the gender parity in your organization**. In this report, we provide new recommendations based on findings made in this study.

1. **Take affirmative action to get women hired on non-staff roles** (UNV, Service Contracts, Consultancies). Our study shows a high significance between a UN Volunteer assignment and retention of Women on staff contracts.
2. **Look for Hardship experience in the resumes and use affirmative actions to give women exposure to hardship.**
3. **Make it easy for your talents to contact Human Resource during the recruitment process.** Our study shows that women who have had the possibility to ask questions to the Hiring Manager or to the Human Resources during the vacancy duration are more likely to apply and tends to retain longer in the organization.

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PART 1
IMPACTPOOL REPORTS



Are women paying a higher price for UN career?

In late 2016 Impactpool sent a survey to 1672 former and current United Nations staff members. All candidates had started their career at a junior staff position (P1 or P2) in the past 25 years. With this survey, we wanted to find out what successful UN staff members have in common, and we discovered there is a lot.

The survey was sent out 1672 respondents and had a high response rate. As a result, it generated a large data set that we then analysed in detail. To begin with, 85% of the respondents were aged between 35 and 55 and 58.3% were women and 41.7% were men.

The results of the questions confirmed many pre-existing ideas, but it also offered some insights into an unfortunate discrepancy. The survey shows that women and men are equally well prepared when entering the UN, but there was a drastic discrepancy in career progression among men and women. In fact, it was found that women who left the UN progressed further up in the hierarchy compared with those who stayed.

Language: junior UN staff members have skills in more than 3 languages

Women who are successful in their applications to an International Organization have on average 3.2 languages, including their native languages. When only official UN languages are considered (that is, Arabic, English, Chinese, French, Russian, Spanish), successful women had an average of 2.32 languages.

Successful male candidates also had an average of 3.2 languages in total, but when it came to UN languages the male candidates had a slightly lower average of 2.1 languages.

Education: 99% of the UN staff members have a Master's Degree or higher

When comparing the education levels of female and male respondents, the numbers look quite similar. The majority UN staff hold a Master's Degree. This is in line with expectations, as most advertised positions for the UN require a Master's Degree or higher.

	Bachelor's	Master's	Dual Master's	PhD	Postdoctoral
Female	1%	73%	17%	6%	2%
Male	1.3%	69.9%	17.8%	9.6%	1.3%

Get relevant experience: no one succeeds fresh out of university

On average, successful female candidates had 2.3 relevant professional jobs before taking on a junior position at the UN. Men had 2.5 relevant jobs before their first assignment.

Come prepared: 6 out of 10 staff worked in International Development or Humanitarian Aid before applying

In a quantitative study, it is difficult to determine the quality of experience and this survey covers diverse areas of expertise. Consequently, we focused on experience we know International Organizations value when long- and short-listing candidates, such as field experience, Hardship experience, Volunteer experience, UN experience, etc.

The question was posed in a multiple-choice format to allow the respondent to select several answers corresponding to her/his background before taking up a role at the UN.

Both the female and male respondents were found to be well prepared before applying: 57.5% of men and 59% of women had experience of working in International Development or Humanitarian Aid before taking on a role at the UN.

Come prepared: 1 out of 5 had some form of Hardship experience

The distribution of men and women who had previous Hardship experience was also even: 17% of men and 18% of women indicated they had experience of Crisis Contexts before taking on their first assignment at the UN.

Hardship experience is valued among UN organizations. We investigated the retention rate among women with Hardship experience, and found that women who had gained this experience prior to their first assignment at the UN had a much higher retention rate than those who did not. In fact, 72.3% of women with Hardship experience were still employed by the UN, whereas the retention rate among women without previous Hardship experience was 54%.

For men with Hardship experience, 76% were still employed, but the same retention percentage applied to the whole population of men. Men without previous Hardship experience also has a retention rate of 76%.

Our hypothesis is that women with Hardship experience have a better understanding of what the work entails when starting their UN post. This hypothesis is confirmed by the retention rates among female staff members who had UN experience before taking up their first official post: among women who had been UN Volunteers the retention rate was as high as 83.3%.

One response to these figures is to focus on recruiting more women who have previously been UN Volunteers or have Hardship experience. Another, likely more effective solution is to work on your Employer Brand, and here Impactpool is your reliable partner - [click here to learn more](#).

Where our survey reveals some surprising results is in relation to the percentage of respondents who worked abroad (but not in a crisis country) before taking on a role at the UN: 83.5% of the male candidates indicated they had acquired this experience, but only 61% of women had.

Another interesting finding was the value of already knowing someone at the organization for which they were applying. The survey showed that 8% of women knew someone in advance, and, strikingly, of that group 80% were still working at the UN. The importance to give talents the possibility to ask questions helping them to decide to apply is also confirmed in a recently published report based on a survey of 203'000 individuals conducted by Boston Consulting Group (BCG). An article published by the [Society for Human Resources Management](#) based on the survey results conclude:

Women typically want details about what the international assignment will entail, according to Katie Abouzahr, lead researcher for the May 3 BCG survey report, who noted that "women

are less willing to 'wing it.' They want to understand what the assignment looks like before they apply."

In most job advertisements the UN recruiters hide their name away from the talents to avoid being “flooded” by questions and applications. A strange contradiction though is that the same recruiters tend (or must) include their names when recruiting consultants. We suggest you assign two recruiters four hours per week to do a live event in one of your social media channels, or why not go together jointly several organizations to save costs, **Impactpool can help you administer and facilitate such initiatives.**

What did you do before starting your junior assignment at the UN?	Male	Female
I had experience working in the private sector	40%	34%
I had experience working in the public sector	87%	41%
I had experience working in International Development/ Humanitarian Aid	57.5%	59%
I had experience working in a crisis country	23%	18%
I had experience working abroad (but not in a crisis country)	83.5%	61%
I had experience working as a UN Volunteer	11%	12%
I had experience working as a Volunteer (outside UNV) at the Peace Corps or similar organization	7%	12%
I had experience working at the UN as a consultant	16.5%	14%
I had experience working at the UN as staff member (locally recruited)	5.4%	6%
I had experience working at the UN as a staff member (internationally recruited)	5.4%	4%

I had a mentor before taking on the role at the UN	4.1%	2%
I knew someone in the organization I applied for	5.4%	8%
My parents worked in the development sector during my childhood	5.4%	2%

PART 2
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Combining family and career

A principal difference between successful female and male talent is revealed when looking at the category we call “Family and career.” Our survey shows that only 45.5% of female respondents had children, compared with 68.5% of their male colleagues. Looking specifically at professionals aged 40 and over, this disparity rises to 45.7% of women having children, in contrast to 84.3% of men.

This gender divide is also apparent when studying marital status. The number of single women is close to 100% higher than the number of single men. The same applies to divorce rates. Close to 50% more of the male respondents were married. When looking at professionals at and aged 40 and over, we can see that 54.2% of the women are married, compared with 81.5% of their male colleagues.

	Children	Married	Single	Divorced
Female	45.5%	54%	38%	8%
Male	68.5%	74%	20%	4%

The challenges for women pursuing a career is further confirmed by questions in the survey exploring why staff members left the organisation. This showed that 62.5% of women who left cited family as a reason. Family was also the most common response given by women who only selected one single reason for leaving. But that was the same for men, Family was also the most common response given by men who only selected one reason.

Confidence in the recruitment process

Our survey found that men are more positive when it comes to trusting the UN recruitment process to be fair: 37% of successful male candidates had faith in the UN recruitment process to be fair, objective and transparent; however only 29% of successful female candidates held the same view.

Are you a man? You're better off staying! Are you a woman? Leave if you want your career to progress!

When studying the quantitative data regarding qualifications and experience, there was no marked difference between men and women. UN junior professionals are consistently a group of highly educated, skilled and motivated men and women. All developed their resumes over several years with the clear objective of making their profiles competitive for a career in this sector.

Given the homogeneity at the time of commencement, it is interesting to follow their career progression. Although the candidate's previous experience and education were very similar, what happens after they enter their UN positions differs significantly. From our analysis it appears that, as a woman, you are better off leaving the UN if you want your career to progress. In exit interviews, we also find that 25% of women leave to accelerate their careers, a figure that corresponds quite well with the number of women that have made careers outside the UN. If you are a man, however, our survey found that you are 6 times more likely to become a D1. You also have a 50% better chance of becoming a P5 than your female colleagues.

Women remaining at the UN

P2	P3	P4	P5	D1	D2 and above
6.25%	22.25%	10%	12.5%	1.25%	0%

Men remaining at the UN

P2	P3	P4	P5	D1	D2 and above
11.8%	25.5%	11.8%	19.6%	7.8%	0%

Women who left the UN

Junior	Mid	Senior	Senior Executive (D2 and above)
0%	26.25%	17.5%	2.5%

Men who left the UN

Junior	Mid	Senior	Senior Executive (D2 and above)
2%	21.5%	0%	0%

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CONCLUSIONS
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Conclusions

Three changes in the recruitment and screening process that will increase the retention of women

1. Take affirmative action to get women hired on non-staff roles (UNV, Service Contracts, Consultancies). Our study shows a high significance between a UN Volunteer assignment and retention of Women on staff contracts.
2. Look for Hardship experience in the resumes and use affirmative actions to give women exposure to hardship.
3. Build networks and abilities for women to ask questions about the job, living conditions, the relocation, the duty station and everything else that ease the decision to submit an application.

Are you more interested in how you can improve the gender parity in your organization?
[Read this article.](#)

Our study shows that:

- Women and men recruited to staff positions at the UN are extremely well educated and professionally prepared;
- Given that a such high percentage either had previous sector experience and public administration experience, our study also shows that most of the young professionals probably had seen the UN or an International Organizations as a career goal;

Our study also shows the challenges of women and career:

- Our study shows that women have a much higher chance of advancing their careers at another International Organisation, whereas men were found to have a greater chance of progression by remaining at the UN.
- Also on the family side, the statistics for women were much sadder than compared to their male colleagues. The divorce rate among women UN staff is much higher compared to men;
- Also, more women are unmarried/singles than men;
- Fewer women than men have children;
- And more women leave the UN of family reasons, but family reason is also a reason why men leave:

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METHODOLOGY
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SURVEY WEAKNESSES

Much of the respondent's origin from a donor country. Future studies would preferably include nationals of all countries of the world. This study included 21 different member states.

We are happy to partner up with organizations who are interested to work with us on the 2017 survey.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Some of the results would benefit from a qualitative study to dive deeper into some of the quantitative results identified, especially the section focusing on Combining family and career. We are happy to work and collaborate with International organizations who would be interested to further dive into this research field.

Please send me an e-mail at henrik@impactpool.org.



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