

By Gail Scott

Illustration by J. Clint La Follette



# History Diplomatic and the women making it

*The five ambassadors to the United States profiled here—one-third of the female corps—discuss the unique challenges of their positions and the crucial role that education and equity play in achieving their professional success and in advancing the status of women and girls in their countries.*

**A small group of powerful women make world history every day. They are ambassadors to the United States, posted in Washington, D.C.: the number one assignment in the world. And—like women in leadership posts worldwide—they stand in the minority among their male colleagues, numbering just 16 out of 178.**

**They hail from Uganda and Cyprus, Liechtenstein and Singapore, Paraguay and Pakistan, South Africa and Ecuador, Bulgaria and Zambia. They are scholars, lawyers, teachers, economists, historians, authors, artists. They arrive single or married, with or without children. But despite their diversity, they all strive for balance—among countries, among peoples, and between sexes.**

### **“Our Only Natural Resource”**

Singapore’s visibility was probably at an all-time high, its image at an all-time low, when Ambassador Chan Heng Chee of Singapore arrived in Washington, D.C., in July 1996.



“We still had the Michael Fay caning episode hanging over us,” says Chan, referring to a U.S. citizen who was punished for vandalizing luxury cars with spray paint. “I worked systematically to change that [tough, authoritarian image]. I met with the cultural elite, think tanks, editorial boards, and journalists. They

heard me talking rationally, and I knocked down that caricature.”

Chan also played a pivotal role in negotiating the United States-Singapore Free Trade Agreement. When signed, she says, it will be the largest trade agreement since NAFTA.

“This is a big deal,” she says proudly. “And it will be completed on my beat.” For the United States, Singapore has an important strategic location. The city-state uncovered terrorist cells linked to Al Qaeda, for example, and helped Indonesia arrest suspects in the nightclub bombing in Bali.

**“Our relationship with the United States has been deepened, strengthened,” says Chan. “It’s never been better.”**

With a master’s degree in government from Cornell University and a doctorate from the National University of Singapore, Chan has held a number of top posts: director of the Singapore International Foundation (Singapore’s version of the Peace Corps) and the prestigious Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, founding director of the Institute of Policy Studies, and professor at the National University of Singapore. In 1989 she became Singapore’s permanent representative to the United

Nations, serving concurrently as high commissioner to Canada and ambassador to Mexico.

As chief administrator of the large, contemporary chancery in Washington, D.C., Chan carries the reputation of a tough taskmaster to her small but well-educated staff. “I always welcome good suggestions, good ideas, and encourage discussion at meetings,” she says, adding, “I expect brilliance to come from even the youngest person.”

A scholar and academic herself, Chan believes that having a highly educated population is Singapore’s strength. “Human resources are our only natural resource,” she says. “Education is key.”

### **“Get the Best Possible Education”**

When Ambassador Claudia Fritsche of Liechtenstein was growing up, women in her tiny principality were barred from higher education. Now, she says, “My message [to] young women is, ‘Get the best possible education.’”

Her parents couldn’t afford to send her abroad, so Fritsche attended business school. Still, lack of a university education didn’t thwart her pursuit of diplomacy. Nor did the daunting company.

“You are competing with former and future foreign ministers, men who are wealthy, from noble families, and that can be intimidating,” says Fritsche, who previously represented her country at the United Nations for 12 years. “But after a few months, I discovered that we’re all trying to do the same things, and I lost my shyness.”

She went on to speak at the U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women and advocate for people with disabilities and the elderly. During upheaval in Kosovo and East Timor, she addressed controversial topics such as a people’s right to self-determination and the prevention of armed conflict.





**July 4, 2001, at the State Department (left to right):** Leila Rachid Cowles, Ambassador of Paraguay, just named to be Foreign Minister; Ivonne A Baki, then Ambassador of Ecuador, now Minister of Foreign Trade, Industry, Fisheries, and Competitiveness; Alma Powell, wife of U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell; Erato Kozakou-Marcoullis, Ambassador of the Republic of Cyprus; U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell; Maleeha Lodhi, then

“In New York it was my pre-eminent task to put Liechtenstein on the map at the United Nations,” she says of this European country, just twice the size of Manhattan and with a prosperous high-tech industry. “Now I’m working to put it on the map in Washington.”

Opening Liechtenstein’s first embassy in Washington, D.C., in October 2002 moved her closer to that goal.

Looking ahead doesn’t stop Fritsche from looking back. “As female ambassadors, we must never forget how long and what it took us to get here,” she says. “We should be especially motivated to mentor young women.”

### “Break the Cycle”

Ugandan Ambassador Edith Grace Ssempala knows the importance of changing laws *and* attitudes.

“As far as the [Ugandan] constitution is concerned, women are equal,” says

Ssempala. Uganda also takes affirmative steps, such as sending a woman from each district to parliament.

But Ugandan boys are raised to be superior, girls and women submissive, says Ssempala. “I have seen women who kneel to their sons, to their sons-in-law, to their husbands. Just imagine what that does, what that reflects,” she says. “And women are beaten, abused, and supposed to accept that as normal. ... Unless we socialize our children, both boys and girls, as equals, we are not going to make a difference.”





*Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan; Arlette Conzemius, Ambassador of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg; Faida Mitifu, Ambassador of the Democratic Republic of Congo; Makate Sheila Sisulu, then Ambassador of the Republic of South Africa, now Deputy Director of U.N. World Food Program; Chan Heng Chee, Ambassador of the Republic of Singapore; Mary Kanya, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Swaziland*

Education is critical, she says: “As long as women do not have their own means and do not have equity in education, we will still have the status quo.”

A civil engineer and human rights advocate, Ssempala lived as a political refugee for 13 years in Sweden before joining her nation’s foreign service in 1986. Ironically, her first post was Stockholm, where she served as ambassador to the Scandinavian countries—Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden—simultaneously. Now in Washington, by day she juggles private congressional meetings on Capitol Hill with other appointments across town and by night makes the rounds of embassy functions that help her stay in the loop to keep her country moving forward.

Uganda’s turbulent history gives Ssempala a unique perspective on change. “I come from a country that has learned to deal with real adversity,” she says. “Uganda emerged out of war, total destruction, with

no track record except the vicious cycle of dictatorships. ... People were afraid, but we had the capacity to break the cycle.”

She believes that through leadership and mentoring, women too have the power to forge a better future. “Those women who have made it know how to look back,” she says. “If all women who succeed in one way or another could reach out to five young women, ... that would make a difference.”

Ssempala acknowledges that change takes time. In the meantime, she says, when people dismiss her because she is a woman, she overlooks the slight: “You can’t be so sensitive when people mistake you to be the ambassador’s wife or secretary.”

### **“Balance Is the Key”**

Girls and boys in her country have equal access to school, says Elena Borislavova Poptodorova, the Bulgarian ambassador. But obstacles for women and girls remain.

**AAUW's discussion with women ambassadors** began at a panel at the November 2002 AAUW Educational Foundation International Symposium, *Global Voices for Gender Equity*. Participants explored how women, especially in emerging nations, have used their education to create change.

Panel Moderator: Ambassador Ruth A. Davis, Director General of the Foreign Service and Director of Human Resources, U.S. Department of State

Her Excellency Edith Grace Ssempala, Ambassador From Uganda to the United States

Her Excellency Makate Sheila Sisulu, Ambassador From South Africa to the United States (now Deputy Director of the U.N. World Food Program)

Her Excellency Elena Borislavova Poptodorova, Ambassador From Bulgaria to the United States

On April 28, 2003, the symposium received a Blue Ribbon Award from the United Nations Association of the National Capital Area, honoring programs that further the goals and understanding of the United Nations.

For information on future conversations at upcoming symposia, visit [www.aauw.org/about/events](http://www.aauw.org/about/events).

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"It's not a woman's world," she says. Compared to men, Bulgarian women receive fewer promotions, fewer top positions, and less pay for equal work, she points out. Females hold just 10 percent of her government's posts, she says, adding, "Women will normally be given areas like health care, education, social welfare. More sophisticated areas such as treaty matters, foreign policy, are given to men."

She advocates more rigorous training—particularly in conflict management and negotiation—for aspiring female leaders.

"Politics is a rough job but also rewarding," she says. "You have to face public criticism, loss of anonymity. I believe this is where women's

organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) come in. They should train their women to face bigger audiences, a more demanding public."

As ambassador since February 2002, she promoted the expansion of the North

Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and celebrated Bulgaria's acceptance into that group in November 2002. Prior to that, Poptodorova, who completed postgraduate work in international relations and diplomacy, served as a member of parliament.

With a longstanding commitment to women's rights, Poptodorova has served as vice chair of the parliament's Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men and worked with the Family Planning Association of Bulgaria and the European network of the International Planned Parenthood Federation. In her work with the International Organization of Parliaments, she was responsible for female parliamentarians in Eastern and Central Europe.

"I'm not a feminist in the extreme sense of the word," she says. "Balance is the key to successful society. What I'm pressing for is redressing an imbalance."

### **"Creating Peace"**

Ambassador Erato Kozakou-Marcoullis of Cyprus came to her U.S. post in 1998 with one agenda: creating peace for her country. She vows not to go home without it.

"It's a mission, not a job," says Kozakou-Marcoullis, who, after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, spent frantic weeks trying to find her family. "There's a difference," she says. "We have a cause, a goal [of reuniting Greek and Turkish Cypriots]."



She worked in law and academia before discovering diplomacy, where she can employ her range of talents and knowledge. Early in her diplomatic career, she served as




director of the Office of the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; as ambassador to Sweden; and as nonresident ambassador to Finland, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. She has worked with the Cypriot delegation to the United Nations and represented her Mediter-

ranean country at international commissions concerning women, racism, and human rights. Today she serves simultaneously as high commissioner to Brazil, the Bahamas,

Barbados, and Guyana and represents her republic in Canada.

According to some diplomatic observers, Kozakou-Marcoullis has been instrumental in moving Cyprus closer to peace than any of her recent male colleagues. She has been involved in the country's successful bid to join the European Union.

"I always try to convince, not demand," she says. "That way I can keep coming back again and again [to the same people]."

With a small staff at the chancery, a booked calendar, and her family—one grown child and her husband, an oncologist—in New York, Kozakou-Marcoullis names her sustenance: "My education and my sense of humor." And, she adds, "I want Cyprus at peace for my son's generation." 

**Gail Scott ([www.diplomaticdance.com](http://www.diplomaticdance.com)) is a longtime diplomatic observer who lives in the District of Columbia. She is a Washington reporter and author of *Diplomatic Dance: The New Embassy Life in America*.**

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