

Bored in Washington: All Work and No Flirt

By Susan Benda

WASHINGTON — If you plan to visit the American capital, you'd better heed this travel advisory: "At all costs, do not flirt."

The fear of sexual harassment lawsuits and political correctness have brought an unprecedented coolness to relations between the

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sexes here. Men pick up the cues, repent and reform. And women learn to subsist on the meager local diet.

Not long ago, I found myself in the salad bar line at my office cafeteria next to a man I had noticed around the law firm. He was kind of cute, I didn't work with him and as far as I knew, he wasn't married. There we were, side by side, deliberating between cucumbers and cherry tomatoes. Our eyes met. Seizing the moment, I complimented him on his colorful sweater.

But slightly embarrassed at my own foray into flirting, I tried to deflect attention by noting that if he had admired my outfit, he would have felt obliged to keep that a secret. My comment resonated with several of the men around the salad bar. One lawyer, who is in his 50's, said that he felt entirely constrained in his interactions with women and simply didn't know how to act anymore.

What's going on?

Sometimes it takes an outsider to point out a bizarre local practice. In talking to foreigners living in Washington, one discovers that they view with horror the antiseptic, antisexual way in which the natives relate:

- A French journalist nearing 40 confides that after a year of living here, she is convinced she had lost her sex appeal. Imagine her relief when, upon her return to France, men actually acknowledge her (female) presence. She knows what sexual harassment is and has no patience for it, but it doesn't mean that she doesn't want to be noticed.

- A Romanian in Washington for a six-week program struggles with a vague and uneasy sense that she has become invisible and is close to desperate by the time she boards her plane for Europe.

- An Argentine woman throws up her hands in exasperation and says: "All I know is if there's any less flirting in this town, I'm going home."

All of these foreign women are serious professionals who are happily married and not in search of a

great love or even a little fling. But they despair at the lack of gracious flirtation that eases male-female relations in their home countries.

According to my unscientific survey of Washington residents in their late 30's to early 40's, men are fearful of flirting or making any comment about a woman's appearance in the course of the work day.

Foreign men also learn the rules. They have told me that they dare not banter with women or ask a woman out on a date if they first encounter her professionally.

When one considers how much time work consumes, this is no minor development — particularly for the single person.

I don't believe I'm overstating the problem. And it is a problem. After all, what's the fun of being

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grown-up if you can't flirt? There has to be some compensation for the grind of monthly mortgage payments, the boredom of weekly grocery shopping and laundry, and the daily ordeal of reporting to an office in a suit.

I'm told, sometimes rather smugly, that this is the inevitable and necessary result and reflection of the success of the women's movement. Are feminism and flirting irreconcilably contradictory concepts?

I think not.

There is a difference between vulgar leering and flirtatious banter. I'll admit that this is a subjective matter, dependent on both the judgment of the beholder and the sensibilities of the beholden. But given the choice, I would much prefer to live with the struggle to find the golden mean, if only because the price of banishing flirting altogether is simply too high.

I don't accept that the choice is between sexism or this "neuterization" of our lives. I am old enough to call myself a feminist — for me that requires no reflection — but I still think that it is (or can be) fun to be female.

The writer is a lawyer in Washington. She contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.