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NAIROBI

HERE IS A notion that could get nowhere in the United States under the current administration but has set the course of women in France on a rocket launch: a cabinet-level minister of women's rights.

In France it is not only a notion, it is a self-made woman in her mid-50s named Yvette Roudy, who has held the post since socialist Prime Minister Francois Mitterrand's 1981 election.

She has put France shoulders ahead of most nations in its approach to women.

Sweden and Austria both have similar positions, but neither with the clout of Roudy's ministry. Sweden's women's affairs post is included in a ministry that also handles other minority issues. Austria has a similar ministry, but no budget to administer it.

Yesterday, shortly before Maureen Reagan told reporters why she and her father's administration oppose the idea of a national women's commission, Roudy explained in an interview why there is no choice but to institute such a structure if women ever are to get a fair deal.

Like Roudy, Reagan heads her country's delegation to the U. N. Decade for Women Conference in Nairobi, now at its mid-point.

Yesterday, as has been the case for much of the past week, larger political questions overshadowed the conference's work on more general women's concerns. Palestinians and other Arab delegates, except for Egypt, walked out on the plenary speech by chief Israel delegate Sarah Doron, and then staged a hallway protest, chanting "Palestine is Arab," "Zionists go away." In committee, the question of the Palestinians was emotionally debated. The PLO, SWAPO, Nicaragua and Cuba attacked the United States for introducing a statement against terrorism. Reagan later described the statement as a "political ploy" to help the United States in its horsetrading on other sore points in the draft conference document, notably references to apartheid, the Palestinians and Zionism as a form of racism in the litany of international evils.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS MINISTER

Yvette Roudy says France will need a women's rights monitor for 'generations.'

Of the course of events in Nairobi, Roudy said it is really a case of men, who have the power in government, directing women at the conference to discuss the political issues over which they have absolutely no say, thus diverting them from talking about the subjects men would rather have ignored — salary differentiation, battered women, child custody, marriage law that favors husbands and exploitation by prostitution.

"Imagine a scenario where the conference members agree to a solution on the Middle East, that Israel returns the occupied territories and an Arab-Israeli federation will be established. They would return to their governments and report on their work — and of course be considered crazy. It is naive to believe this could be useful.

"The only way women can decide important matters is to be in decision-making positions. And the only way they can get there is to first fight discrimination."

Roudy has built an unfunded office called the State Secretariat for Women's Status into a four-story operation with a staff of more than 130, 35 con-

sultants and 22 regional delegates.

Her budget is about \$16.2 million, and polls show her to be among the government's most popular ministers.

Reagan said she spoke for her father's administration in opposing the idea of a national commission on women's rights.

"I think it's time we integrated women into policymaking within all of the federal government and I would rather have two or three women in the cabinet than have a commission," Reagan said, adding that state and city governments were free to have such arrangements and that many did.

"It's a choice," Roudy said. "The advantage of having a ministry is that you then have political authority. You can ensure you will be heard and you can intervene at the other ministries and appeal directly to the president. I tried having a person in each ministry and bringing them together for coordinated action, but I failed."

Among the achievements since Roudy became minister:

● A new law that gives a clearer definition of the value of work, under which experience can be considered

equivalent to a diploma. Roudy herself stopped school at 12 to help support her family and got her high school diploma at night.

● Companies must file annual reports comparing the situations of men and women they employ and, if necessary, submit an equality plan. The ministry has offered remedial assistance to women to encourage them to go into areas, such as the aerospace industry, where there traditionally have been few women applicants.

● The percentage of women among the unemployed has decreased.

● A national campaign has been launched to radically expand the career guidance given to schoolgirls, with the theme, "Professions have no sex."

● Parliament passed a 1982 law requiring the national medical system to reimburse women for voluntary abortions.

● Free lancers and wives of artisans and retailers were given rights that allow them to benefit from state maternity allowances previously denied them.

● The state has been interposed between a divorced woman and her former husband delinquent in maintenance payments. The state can have the payments taken off the top of his salary on her behalf, sparing her a court battle.

● Tax-deduction improvements have been instituted to favor, instead of penalize, working married women with children.

● Paternity or maternity leave from jobs at the discretion of both parents has been enacted in the case of birth or adoption. Previously a father could only have paternity leave if the mother renounced her claim to it.

● And, a terminology commission has been created to eliminate sexist references from the French language.

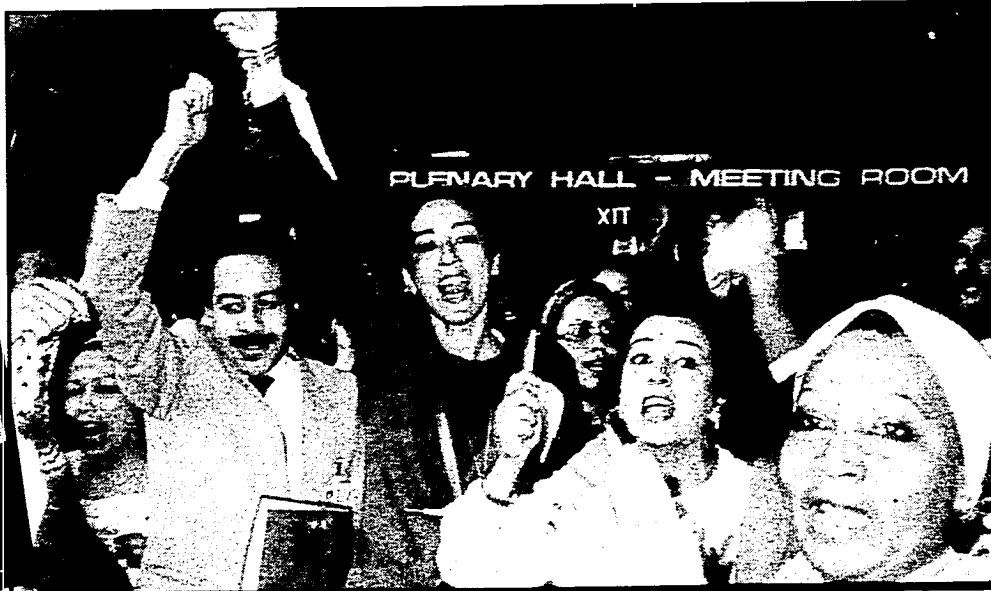
At first, Roudy said she thought it would not be necessary to have a specific women's cabinet-level post for more than 15 years.

"Now, I believe it will need to exist for many generations," she said. "When I see all that needs to be done so that women can fully develop all their intellectual and physical potential . . . I realize it will take a long time."

"Modifying mentality is harder than passing a law," she said. /■



Agence France Presse



Reuters

Yvette Roudy, left, has been minister of women's rights in France since Francois Mitterrand formed a cabinet in 1981. At the women's conference in Nairobi, anti-Israel protesters, above, walk out on a speech by Israel's chief delegate.