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# For Office Civility, Cherchez La Femme

By MAUREEN DOWD

PARIS

On the way up to Christine Lagarde's office high above the Seine, you pass through a lobby filled with wall after wall of black-and-white photos of her predecessors as French finance minister: all men.

They include a former president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing; a current president, Nicolas Sarkozy, and a former favorite to be president, Dominique Strauss-Kahn.

DSK, as he's known here, is holding a pen, beaming with confidence.

His photo on the front page of Le Figaro on Lagarde's coffee table looks far different: the humbled former International Monetary Fund chief flanked by two New York detectives at his house-arrest pad in TriBeCa, a \$50,000-a-month apartment so "luxueuse," as the paper says, that it is giving the Socialist Party "malaise."

Another black-and-white expanse greets you when you enter Lagarde's office: the zebra-patterned carpet she put in so she wouldn't always be facing "men in gray suits on a gray rug."

The attractive, 55-year-old Lagarde — 5-foot-10 and lithe with short silver hair and blue-green eyes — is gliding around on the zebra rug in her nude patent Christian Louboutin high heels. The woman has

panache.

What else would you expect from someone who became a synchronized swimmer on the French national team after watching Esther Williams movies as a girl?

“She was a little bit plumpy, which was lovely,” Madame Minister says of the ’50s movie star, adding that she does a bit of her old practice, in addition to working on her rose garden and cooking, when she’s at her home in Normandy. “I love the sea. I think I must have been a dolphin in a previous life.”

Synchronized swimming taught her teamwork and how to hold her breath when world economies dived underwater.

She was, she says, “born independent.” When she was 4, she confides in her melodic low voice, her “totally irresponsible” parents would put her and her infant brother to bed and sneak out to the theater and concerts. One night they came back and found all the lights on. Christine was ensconced in a big chair in the living room, reading her book. “Next time,” she nonchalantly told her parents, “just let me know when you go.”

France’s first female finance minister got a boost in her bid to become the first female head of the I.M.F. at the G-8 meeting in Deauville when Sarkozy lobbied President Obama, Hillary Clinton offered a girl-power endorsement, and Dmitri Medvedev proclaimed a near-consensus. Lagarde asserts that après le DSK déluge, leadership skills count more for the world’s banker than “super-duper training and degrees in economics.”

She says she’s ready to personally go woo China, India and other countries angry over the prospect of yet another European getting a job that they feel should be the prize of a developing country. She heads to Brazil on Monday.

She feels deeply that “with an institution with so many different people with different backgrounds, there’s a need for respect and tolerance. I know what it’s like to walk into a room where you are just by yourself, and everybody else is wearing dark suits, and you feel for a few seconds slightly intimidated

and not always welcome.”

She dismisses the charge that she overstepped to get a \$408 million legal settlement for a Sarkozy pal, the controversial businessman Bernard Tapie, calling it “a politically driven initiative by the Socialist Party.”

France is soul-searching in the wake of DSK’s DNA stains, debating whether the press is too protective of predatory politicians, whether there are too many liaisons dangereuses between journalists and officials, and whether sexism is taken seriously enough.

Lagarde agrees with The Times’s veteran Paris correspondent Elaine Sciolino that this is an Anita Hill moment for France.

“I think there will be a pre-DSK and a post-DSK,” she says. “And things that may have been tolerated or generally accepted as O.K. will no longer be. I think women will take some confidence and pride out of whatever happens.”

Because the story came out “so brutally and without notice,” she says, the French had a hard time understanding “adversarial” American justice and went into “a huge denial.”

“Rightly or wrongly, a lot of people in the media and the establishment had assumed that he was not only persona grata, but that he was going to be the next president of France,” Lagarde says. “So they had taken him to the pinnacle and then suddenly he was down in the cellar, the gutter. In the denial phase, they had to go through that victimization of the man, while ignoring the real victim, and it led to unacceptable and disgusting comments by some of his friends. Male friends, of course.”

The journalist Jean-François Kahn said he was “practically certain” that DSK was not trying to rape the Sofitel maid, but was merely engaging in “troussage de domestique,” lifting the skirt of the servant.

Jack Lang, a former government minister, cracked, “It’s not like anybody died.”

Lagarde has never been the darling of the French elite. When she became minister of finance, she says,

“people were not particularly nice to me and the media was very keen to point at mistakes or being too blunt or not using the politically correct phrases. I did what I always do. I just gritted my teeth and smiled and got on with it.”

In 2007, she made a speech suggesting that her countrymen abandon their “old national habit” of over-intellectualizing. “Enough thinking, already!” she urged. “Roll up your sleeves.”

As she told me on Friday, “I said they’d done enough thinking to fill in shelves of libraries of the entire world. I said it was time they got on with action.”

Sciolino writes about the howling that followed in her new book, “La Seduction”: “For the men, here was a French woman brainwashed by too many years in America who was trying to castrate the intellectuals of France!”

The male elite hit back. Bernard-Henri Lévy (who has been vociferously defending his pal DSK) disdainfully noted: “This is the sort of thing you can hear in cafe conversations from morons who drink too much.”

Lagarde shrugs. “I have no regret,” she says. “I was bashed. But the messages got through, I would hope. I don’t mind too much a little Parisian circle that says: ‘Hmmp, she’s not part of us. She’s spent too much time on the other side.’ ”

Like her dynamic boss, Sarkozy, Lagarde is known as “L’Americaine” — not a compliment here. The divorced mother of two grown sons, who now dates a hunky Marseilles real estate developer, attended Holton-Arms high school in the Washington area in an exchange program and spent two decades as a lawyer at Baker & McKenzie in Chicago.

During the financial crisis, her much-criticized tendency to dispense with French protocol allowed her to soar. Her public response to the Lehman collapse was “Holy cow!” She was fast, blunt and able to speak English without a translator.

Even before DSK's vertiginous fall, Lagarde, who has three younger brothers and who elbowed her way to the top male tier of the City of Broad Shoulders, had warned about the dangers of too much "hairy-chested" testosterone. In Chicago, she says, she had "boys on my team. And I could see them, especially when they were a little bit amongst themselves and I was just in the background, and it was about, 'Oh, I can do better than you. I've got more of this and more of that. And I've got more billable hours.' It's complete nonsense."

She noticed, when she worked on big termination packages after mergers, that men would feel their worlds were collapsing while women's egos were "more diversely invested."

She believes that women in the mix — "if they accept to just be themselves and not play boys' games" — can "make it a bit more civilized, bring it back to normality."

Lagarde's role models were her mother, a professor of French, Latin and ancient Greek who was widowed when Christine was 16, and an older female partner at Baker & McKenzie, a "solid professional" who put on a little lipstick before seeing clients.

"Neither overplayed their femininity," she says. "They did not try to charm or lift their skirt to show their knees. But they were women."

Perhaps a woman who dominates without being domineering is just what is needed at the I.M.F., a macho island outside U.S. law with the sexual norms of a libidinous pirate ship.

The French are reconsidering the line between seduction and aggression. I asked Lagarde how she would delineate it.

"You know when you receive a big slap in the face," she says, "or when someone says 'No.'"

Has she ever felt sexually harassed?

"No, I'm too tall. I've been in sports for too long," she says, smiling and flexing the muscle under her black Ann Taylor jacket.

“They know that I could just punch them.”



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