WASHINGTON — It is an international island in the midst of the American capital, a sharp-elbowed place ruled by alpha male economists. The days are long, and employees are regularly pressed together for weeks on end during overseas “missions.” It is a climate in which romances often flourish — and lines are sometimes crossed.

Some women avoid wearing skirts for fear of attracting unwanted attention. Others trade whispered tips about overly forward bosses. A 2008 internal review found few restraints on the conduct of senior managers, concluding that “the absence of public ethics scandals seems to be more a consequence of luck than good planning and action.”

This is life at the International Monetary Fund, the lender of last resort for governments that need money and, under the leadership of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, an emerging force in the regulation of the global economy.

But with Mr. Strauss-Kahn’s arrest earlier this week and indictment on Thursday on charges that he tried to rape a New York hotel housekeeper, a spotlight has been cast on the culture of the institution. And questions have been revived about a 2008 episode in which the I.M.F. decided that Mr. Strauss-Kahn had not broken any rules in sleeping with a female employee.

What may draw even more attention to the culture of the fund is the revelation of an affair involving a potential successor to Mr. Strauss-Kahn, who resigned as managing director on Wednesday. Kemal Dervis of Turkey had a liaison while working at the World Bank years ago with a woman who now works at the I.M.F., according to a person with direct knowledge of the relationship.

Interviews and documents paint a picture of the fund as an institution whose sexual norms and customs are markedly different from those of Washington, leaving its female employees vulnerable to harassment. The laws of the United States do not apply inside its walls, and until earlier this month the I.M.F.’s own rules contained an unusual provision that some experts and former officials say has encouraged managers to pursue the women who work for them: “Intimate personal relationships between supervisors and subordinates do not, in themselves, constitute harassment.”

“It’s sort of like ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’: the rules are more like guidelines,” said Carmen M. Reinhart, a prominent female economist who served as the I.M.F.’s deputy director for research from 2001 to 2003. “That sets the stage, I think, for more risk-taking.”

In 2007, officials at the fund declined to investigate a complaint by an administrative assistant who had slept with her supervisor, and who charged that he had given her poor performance reviews to pressure her to continue the relationship. Officials told the woman that the supervisor planned to retire soon, and therefore there was no point in investigating the charges, according to findings by the I.M.F.’s internal court.

The official, who is not named in the records, told investigators that he also had a sexual relationship with a second employee, and that he did not believe he had acted improperly.

In another case, a young woman who has since left the I.M.F. said that in 2009, a senior manager in her department started sending her increasingly explicit e-mails seeking a relationship. She complained to her boss, who did not take any action.

“They said they took it seriously, but two minutes later they were turning around and acting like everything was O.K. to the person who had done it to me,” said the woman, who spoke on condition of anonymity because she still works in the international development community. “He wasn’t punished. Not at all.”

Virginia R. Canter, who joined the I.M.F. last year with responsibility for investigating harassment claims, said the institution recently took a series of strong steps to protect employees. A new code of conduct adopted on May 6
specifies that intimate relationships with subordinates “are likely to result in conflicts of interest” and must be disclosed to the proper authorities.

“It’s recognizing that sometimes relationships grow in the workplace,” Ms. Canter said. “But it doesn’t mean we’re not sensitive to this issue and we will investigate if there is evidence to suggest harassment.”

She also said that the fund would not again brush aside an employee complaint like the one from the assistant who was sleeping with her boss. “Absolutely that wouldn’t have happened today,” she said. “We would investigate the matter.”

The I.M.F., created in 1945, has 2,400 employees evaluating the economic health of nations from a pair of huge Washington buildings and on regular trips abroad. When nations borrow money from the fund, they typically must agree to adopt economic reforms, and employees are sent to watch their progress.

In recent years the fund has tried to diversify by hiring more women, Even so, only six of the I.M.F.’s 30 senior executives are women. Only 21.5 percent of all managers at the fund are women, compared with 32 percent at its sister institution, the World Bank, and 26 percent at the United Nations secretariat.

Some women say the fund is a welcoming work environment.

“I haven’t met any cases in my career of sexual harassment,” said Teresa Ter-Minassian, who spent 37 years at the I.M.F. and retired last year as director of the fiscal affairs department.

Some issues arise from cultural differences. In one case, a married Muslim woman complained when her European boss paid her a compliment that was innocuous but unrelated to work, the only subject she considered permissible.

“Culturally, there are a lot of people thrown together,” said Susan Schadler, who spent 32 years at the fund, rising to deputy director of the European department before leaving in 2007. “There’s a lot of scope for misunderstanding, misreading signals. I think that’s a particular vulnerability for the fund.”

The new relationship policy is a response to the 2008 case in which a Hungarian economist, Piroska M. Nagy, had a relationship with Mr. Strauss-Kahn.

Ms. Nagy described herself in a letter to investigators as “damned if I did and damned if I didn’t.”

An independent investigation found that Mr. Strauss-Kahn had not abused his power. Though he apologized publicly, many women at the I.M.F. were dismayed by the outcome.

“What are we supposed to make of this when we go into Strauss-Kahn’s office?” Ms. Schadler said, recounting conversations with former colleagues. “Do we sit there and think, ‘He’s sizing me up as a potential sexual object?’ ”

“There is this implicit culture that this wasn’t really seen as something that the fund is going to worry about,” she said, “and I think that’s what bothered women.”