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## **Engendering the Global Agenda: A Success Story of Women and the United Nations**

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## **Engendering the Global Agenda: A Success Story of Women and the United Nations**

*Women's international organizations, which were still very young, had interesting collaboration with the first intergovernmental peace organization, the League of Nations, in the 1920s and 1930s. This collaboration also gave them very important experience and facilities to participate effectively in the founding process of the United Nations in the 1940s, immediately after the Second World War. This early history of engendering intergovernmental politics has attracted the interest of researchers surprisingly late, as late as the early years of the 1990s (Miller, 1992). During this decade the process of engendering the global agenda has, in practice, achieved irreversible results.*

### **1. Prologue – Women and the League of Nations**

The founding of the League of Nations marked the beginning of organized and institutionalized intergovernmental collaboration in a form which was unprecedented in world history. This was the first step in intergovernmental foreign policy towards supranational goals – such as peace and security – instead of each nation merely defending their individual interests against the interests of others. Women immediately seemed to realise the nature of the cooperation in the making. They had good reason to become interested in this new development. First, all intergovernmental cooperation aiming at the ending of wars and violence and the settlement of disputes through negotiations corresponded with the yearning for peace in women's minds. This desire was particularly strong in everybody's mind after having experienced the destruction and horrors of war in massive proportions, as was the case after both of the World Wars.

Another reason for women's commitment to intergovernmental collaboration, right from the beginning, has clearly been their firm belief in the fact that the advancement of women in different countries requires governmental policies and democratic opportunities for women to influence those policies. Since the pursuit for the strengthening of both the prerequisites for peace and the advancement and empowerment of women united women across borders, women saw promising chances for the advancement of their own aspirations in the new intergovernmental cooperation.

It is, however, amazing to see how well prepared the international women's organizations were to set out to influence the intergovernmental process right after the First World War. After all, the international organization of women's cooperation was still very young: the first women's international organizations began to emerge at the turn of the century and during the First World War.

- *Women at the Paris Peace Conference 1919*

In 1919, after the First World War, the representatives of governments gathered at the Paris Peace Conference to establish the League of Nations and the International Labour Organisation. Representatives of women's international organizations were already present, giving their own proposals regarding the Covenant of the League of Nations in order to prevent the exclusion of women from the provisions and decisions.

In this context, women founded the Inter-Allied Suffrage Conference (IASC), whose delegation received the right to participate in certain peace conference commissions. Provided with the chance to meet the representatives of fourteen Allied governments, the delegation immediately urged that women be provided with access to the decision-making positions in the League of Nations. Furthermore, they already had proposals on issues that they wished to be included in the programme of the newly established League. They proposed that the League set out to promote universal suffrage in the member states, take measures to recognize the right of a woman married to a foreigner to keep her nationality and include in this programme the abolition of traffic in women and children and state-supported prostitution. In addition, they called for the creation of international education and health bureau and the control and reduction of armaments.

Based on these proposals, the Covenant of the League of Nations declared that the member states should promote humane conditions of labour for men, women and children as well as prevent traffic in women and children. It also included wording that obliged governments to permit all positions in the League of Nations, including the Secretariat, to be open equally to men and women.

At the same time, women from American and British trade unions were on the move when the constitution of the *International Labour Organisation (ILO)* was being drafted. They called for an eight-hour working day, a forty-four-hour work week, an end to child labour, support for social insurance, pensions and maternity benefits, equal pay for equal work for women and men as well as minimum wages for housework. Their proposals were politely received but quickly shelved as being far too radical.

Nevertheless, women's active efforts resulted in the inclusion of a reference to fair and humane conditions of labour for men, women and children in the International Labour Legislation. The work towards the other objectives first presented at this early stage has continued ever since, but some of the objectives have still not been achieved.

- *People's Organizations and Intergovernmental Cooperation*

After the founding of the League of Nations and the ILO, representatives of women's organizations began to regularly observe the operations of the intergovernmental organizations and give their own proposals to government representatives. They founded the Liaison Committee of Women's International Organizations which became "the voice of women" in Geneva. The women's organizations campaigned throughout the 1920s and 1930s to ensure,

amongst other things, that women and women's rights would not be neglected as the League established an authority in the international legal protection of the human rights of other groups.

This was the start of the dialogue between international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and an intergovernmental organization (IGO), i.e., the League of Nations. Forerunners in this dialogue, which later on continued with the United Nations, include women's international organizations such as the *International Council of Women (ICW)*, the *International Alliance of Women (IAW)*, the *International Cooperative Women's Guild (ICWG)*, the *International Federation of Business and Professional Women*, the *International Federation of University Women (IFUW)*, the *World Young Women's Christian Association (WYWCA)* and *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)*, which were based mainly in Europe and the United States.

"While each type of organization clearly had distinct goals and priorities, they all believed that the League of Nations was an important vehicle for social and political reforms, in particular, the advancement of the status of women", says Carol Miller. These organizations were estimated to represent forty-five million women, but "a leadership cohort of middle and upper-class British, Scandinavian and American women who met on a regular basis in London or Geneva coordinated women's international work." (Miller 1992:iii)

Encouraged by the founding of the ILO, American female trade unionists convened the first International Congress of Working Women in collaboration with women from the European trade unions in Washington, DC, in 1919. *The International Federation of Working Women (IFWW)* was also founded at this conference, and decisions were reached regarding a united approach to women's questions at the forthcoming annual International Labour Conferences. The ILO operations towards the development of labour regulations had a brisk start as early as in the 1920s, with women participating intensively right from the beginning.

The operations of women's organizations in those times can now be compared to the large-scale NGO conferences arranged in connection with the recent UN world conferences. In Paris in 1919 a handful of newly established women's international organizations arranged the first parallel conference to coincide with the intergovernmental conference, with the aim of having their voice heard in the discussions of the governments. It was not until twenty-five years later, at the founding of the UN, that some of the proposals made then by women reached the ears of the governments. Women's early proposals had included international collaboration in fields such as education and health care, but the world had to wait until 1946 to see the UN create the UNESCO and WHO to address these issues. Women also had clear demands regarding disarmament and arms control, issues which were to become fundamental parts of the UN operations right from the onset.

In the recent decades the parallel NGO conferences have become a permanent feature in connection with the UN world conferences, gathering thousands of people from around the world to monitor the proceedings of the intergovernmental events. These peoples' fora create massive publicity for issues that people from around the world wish to emphasize.

- *Latin American Women as Forerunners*

Latin American women, for their part, were instrumental in the decision by the International Conference of American States in 1928 to create the *Inter-American Commission of Women (IACW)*, the first intergovernmental body to address issues related to the status of women. The IACW prepared and the governments adopted the Montevideo Convention on the Nationality of Married Women in 1933. This was the first intergovernmental convention providing women and men with equal status with respect to nationality. In 1935 the League of Nations approved the Convention and urged all the member nations to ratify it.

The IACW also prepared the Declaration of Lima in Favor of Women's Rights (1938). It was as early as this that the IACW encouraged member governments to establish women's bureaux, to revise discriminatory civil codes and to take their initiatives regarding these issues to the League of Nations (Galey 1995).

Perhaps the most concrete achievement in women's ability to make an impact at the international level was the Committee of Experts on the Legal Status of Women established by the League of Nations in 1937 and authorized to conduct a "comprehensive and scientific inquiry into the legal status of women in various countries of the world." The Committee's work had barely begun when the Second World War broke out, but its founding was an important step towards the establishment of women's human rights on the agenda of intergovernmental cooperation. This Expert Committee can also be regarded as the predecessor of the *Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)* established later on by the UN.

- *Pacifist and Feminist Aims*

To summarise the relationship between the women's organizations and the League of Nations, Carol Miller refers to two pathbreaking achievements:

Firstly, women *created a model for cooperation and interaction between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and intergovernmental organizations*. In those days the practice was that only heads of states, foreign ministers and leading diplomats were entitled to participate in intergovernmental conferences. Women, however, demanded the right to have access to the meetings in the Conference Hall and to the official documents, and the right to distribute their statements in the Hall as well as to interact with official delegates, i.e., literally to practice lobbying. They were granted these rights firstly at the League of Nations World Disarmament Conference in 1932, and later at other meetings.

Secondly, through their well-prepared proposals and credible actions, the women's international organizations were able to *establish the so-called women's issues on the agenda of international cooperation*, in other words, issues related to the status of women were international issues, not purely domestic concerns. This principle was established at the League of Nations at a time when women in many of the member states did not even enjoy political rights and when women were not accepted as diplomats (Miller 1995).

Although pacifist aims, disarmament and peace were important reasons for women's support to the League of Nations, Carol Miller points out that feminist objectives, the essence of which was the legal recognition of women's equality, were clearly as significant. From this perspective, the founding of the Expert Committee mentioned above was in itself a victory showing that the securing of equality between women and men and the status of women were issues that could not be left for the governments alone to decide upon. These early days saw systematic work towards convincing the League of Nations to draw up and adopt an *international equal rights convention*.

These were the beginnings of the formulation of a 'dialectic', indirect, two-way strategy that has been used to advance women's objectives throughout the history of the United Nations. When women found it very slow or impossible to promote their objectives at the national level in their own countries, they took their issue past their national governments to intergovernmental organizations. Their collaboration within these organizations has often resulted in resolutions and recommendations, even international conventions, that are more advanced than those adopted at national levels. These accepted intergovernmental instruments have then been effectively used by women to pressure their governments and legislators to adopt and implement compatible laws in their respective countries.

As British pacifist and feminist Vera Brittain put it: "the time has now come to move from the national to the international sphere, and to endeavour to obtain by international agreement what national legislation has failed to accomplish" (Miller, 1994, .221).

The favourable attitude of the League of Nations towards women's activism was based on the fact that its leaders soon realized how valuable a lobby or support group women were for the League in almost every member state. Women, on the other hand, saw the League as a new and powerful arena for the advancement of their objectives – peace, human rights and the equality of women as people and citizens in all countries. Thus the initiatives of the pioneering women received a positive response and, due to their tenacious and clever diplomacy, the League of Nations became a body far ahead of most of its member states with regard to the interests of women.

## **2. The Founding Mothers of the United Nations**

The operations and the official existence of the League of Nations ended with the onset of the Second World War. In retrospect, however, it is clear that the work carried out during its existence was not in vain.

History shows that the bases and models for intergovernmental cooperation created by the League of Nations formed a firm basis on which to build the new intergovernmental peace organization which was already being outlined by the Allied nations during the war. Thanks to the collaboration between women's international organizations, models of cooperation had already been created between international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and



intergovernmental organizations. Furthermore, the so-called women's issues had gained visibility and become already a familiar item on the international agenda.

Due to women's actions in the 1920s and 1930s, there was a substantial group of women in all countries who had gained experience and expertise in the international arena and in networking. Women in the official government delegations, representatives of women's organizations and the women in significant positions in the League of Nations kept in touch with each other and acted in consort to further their common objectives.

Women's earlier experiences were an indispensable asset when the UN founding conference in 1945 was approaching. Consequently, women were appointed to several of the government delegations participating in the San Francisco conference. There were four Latin American women serving as delegates: Minerva Bernardino (Dominican Republic), Amália Caballero de Castillo Ledón (Mexico), Bertha Lutz (Brazil) and Isabel P. de Vidal (Uruguay). In addition, two women in the Venezuelan delegation, Lucila L. de Perez Diaz and Isabel Sanchez de Urdaneta, served as advisors. The women delegates representing other countries included Cora T. Casselman (Canada), Jessie Street (Australia) and Wu Yi-Fang (China). The US delegation had five women, Virginia Gildersleeve as a delegate and the others as advisors. Ellen Wilkinson and Florence Horsbrugh were assistant United Kingdom delegates.

Four of these women delegates, Minerva Bernardino, Bertha Lutz, Wu Yi-Fang and Virginia Gildersleeve, were also among the 160 signatories of the UN Charter as representatives of their governments.

#### - *Dispute over the Basic Concepts*

Many of these women had several overlapping mandates which added weight to their contributions. Amália Caballero de Castillo Ledón was the chair of the *Inter-American Commission on Women (IACW)* mentioned above, and both Bertha Lutz and Minerva Bernardino were members. They also acted informally on behalf of the IACW and were instrumental in the movement which demanded that the Preamble to the UN Charter must reaffirm not only the nations' "faith in fundamental human rights" and "the dignity and worth of the human person" but also in "the equal rights of men and women".

Consequently, this wording was incorporated into the Charter. Later generations have regarded this wording to be of crucial importance since the Charter legitimized right from the beginning the demands for full equality, equal rights for women and men alike. Had this wording not been ensured in San Francisco, a long struggle to substantiate this warranty would have ensued. The fact that a total of four different Articles in the Charter affirm that the human rights and fundamental freedoms belong to all "without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion" gave strength to the initial wording. (Articles 1(3), 55, 68 and 76.).

Jessie Street, an Australian with the backing of a powerful network of women's organizations in her country and good connections with numerous women from several other countries made a strong impact in San Francisco. She pushed for the inclusion of an article in the Charter

which corresponded to the stipulation incorporated into the Covenant of the League of Nations making all positions in the United Nations equally open to men and women. The proposal was widely supported and formulated as Article 8: "The United Nations shall place no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate in any capacity and under conditions of equality in its principal and subsidiary organs."

This Article was incorporated into the final text of the Charter, although a special attempt by forces hostile to any special endorsement of women's eligibility was made to remove it. The women activists in those days regarded this article as another highly significant achievement for the advancement of women. In the years thereafter, however, those persistent women must have felt severely disappointed in observing how the Article was grossly ignored. Only recently, during the past couple of decades, has this Article been given appropriate recognition, and the number of women in high positions in the UN system has increased rapidly (United Nations 1998).<sup>1</sup>

The actual work of the United Nations began with the inaugural session of the General Assembly in London in early 1946. The issue of women's rights reappeared in the session as a prominent item on the international agenda for the first time since the beginning of the Second World War. Seventeen women participated in this session as delegates or advisers to the respective delegations. They prepared an historical document, "An Open Letter to the women of the world from the women at the first Assembly of the United Nations." The letter introduced the UN to the women of the world as "the second attempt of the peoples of the world to live peacefully in a democratic world community" and called upon them to take the important opportunity and responsibility which confront women in the United Nations and their respective countries. (Annex I)

Ms Lefauchaux of the French delegation initiated the letter but it was delivered to the Assembly by a delegate of the United States to the session, Eleanor Roosevelt. Mrs Roosevelt urged the governments to take the letter home and encourage women everywhere to come forward and "share in the work of peace and reconstruction as they did in war and resistance." She expressed her conviction that the United Nations "can – if we give to it as much work as we have given in the past to winning the war – be an instrument to win the peace."

This letter was the first formal articulation of women's voice in the UN and an outline of the role for women to play in a new arena of international politics and cooperation. The Open Letter was neither discussed, nor formally adopted, but further elaboration and interesting supportive statements were given by several delegates. The letter and the statements are recorded with the hope expressed by the President of the session that the issue "will be taken into very serious consideration" (United Nations 1995: 93–98).

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<sup>1</sup> The percentage of women at the Professional level has increased from 35.5 percent to 36.8 percent from 1 January 1997 to 1 January 1998. Over the same period, the percentage of women staff in higher-level positions (D-1 and above) increased from 18.5 percent in December 1996 to 22.6 percent as of 1 January 1999 (E/CN.6/1998/8).

- *New Dimensions for the United Nations*

The UN Charter established three new substantive elements of crucial importance for women that had not been features of the League of Nations.

1. In addition to political tasks, the UN was given the mandate "to promote economic and social progress and development". One of the five principal organs, the *Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)*, was established to be in charge of these operations. It was also mandated to establish subsidiary bodies, such as the *United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)*, the *United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)*, the *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)* and specialized agencies, such as *Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)*, *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)*, the *World Health Organization (WHO)*, etc. (Article 55a of the Charter.)
2. Concerning human rights, "the UN shall promote universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion." (Article 55c.)
3. The legitimization of the collaborative relationship between non-governmental organizations and the UN. Article 71 of the UN Charter provides the framework within which NGOs can acquire consultative status with ECOSOC. This opportunity has been utilized by, amongst others, all the women's international organizations that had already been collaborating actively with the League of Nations.

The creation of the *Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)* under ECOSOC, was another area requiring a considerable struggle. Although, in a way, as previously mentioned, CSW already had a precedent in the League of Nations, contrary to the wishes of the women participating in the founding conference, it was initially set up as a sub-commission of the Commission on Human Rights.

However, the first Chair of the Sub-Commission on the Status of Women, Bodil Begtrup from Denmark – the President of the Danish National Council of Women and a former delegate to the League of Nations – did manage at the second session of ECOSOC to push through a resolution establishing the CSW as an independent entity. Therefore, despite the failure to reach a decision on this in San Francisco in 1945, CSW was able to commence its operations as an independent Commission as early as 1947. Bodil Begtrup continued as the Chair and Jessie Street was elected as the first Vice Chair of the Commission. The members included Amália Caballero Ledón and Isabel Urdaneta who had already been active members of their national delegations in San Francisco.

Why is it that women, right from the very start, so persistently demanded a special Commission on the Status of Women instead of pursuing their cause through a sub-commission of the Commission on Human Rights? Bodil Begtrup, a key advocate of the Commission, argued that women did not want to be dependent on the pace of another commission. They believed that through a commission of their own they could proceed more

quickly than in the Commission of Human Rights where their proposals would end up in the queue with so many other human rights issues.

On the other hand, at that stage no one knew how the work of these functional commissions under ECOSOC – including those on Social Development and the Rights of Minorities among a few others – would be organized. In fact, in the course of time it has been seen that in the independent Commission on the Status of Women the proposals by women have gained a totally different weight and significance than what would have been the case within the Commission on Human Rights. As an independent commission, CSW was entitled to set its own agenda, to decide on its priorities and to report and make proposals directly to ECOSOC.

John P. Humphrey, the first director of the UN Secretariat Division of Human Rights, gives an interesting account of CSW in his memoirs: "[M]ore perhaps than any other United Nations body the delegates to the Commission on the Status of Women were personally committed to its objectives ... [and] acted as a kind of lobby for the women of the world.... There was no more independent body in the UN. Many governments had appointed ... as their representatives women who were militants in their own countries" (Humphrey 1984, in Morsink 1991).

"The UN Charter gave women slim, formal recognition, but the human rights provisions gave women constitutional-legal leverage to renew their quest to improve their status, achieve full citizenship with men, and enter the world's political stage," is how Margaret Galey (1995) assesses the significance of the UN Charter to women.

*- The Mission and Mandate of the Commission on the Status of Women*

In the years from 1946 to 1962, CSW focused on mapping out the legal status of women in the Member States, and later on the preparation of legislation and international conventions for the advancement of the status of women. The resources of the Commission were extremely low, and the assistance provided was limited to a Section on the Status of Women with a very small staff within the Human Rights Division of the United Nations Department of Social Affairs. This shortage of assistance was partly compensated for by the motivation and enthusiasm of the members of the Commission.

Nevertheless, the first thing the Commission did in the initial session was to specify its mission and mandate:

The two basic functions of the Commission are to "prepare recommendations and reports to the Economic and Social Council on promoting women's rights in the political, economic, civil and educational fields", and to make recommendations "on urgent problems requiring immediate attention in the field of women's rights". The Commission also has the mandate to make proposals on the further development of its functions and mandate. ([E/RES/2/11, 21 June 1946](#))

Women's international organizations were the main channel through which the Commission aspired to establish a direct contact with the women of Member States. They had already manifested their interest and resourcefulness when the Commission was being founded. Through the acquisition of a consultative status stipulated by ECOSOC, representatives of these NGOs received the right to participate as observers at Commission sessions and have access to the reports and documents drawn up by the Commission. Upon the Commission's approval, they could also address the sessions.

As early as the first session in February 1947, the Commission heard twelve women's international organizations. Most of these were organizations that had already established a relationship with the League of Nations and been active at the United Nations founding conference. The Committee also expressed its willingness to collaborate with *the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU)*, *the American Federation of Labor and the International Cooperative Alliance*, even though these were not women's organizations as such.

Since its inception women's international organizations have been very eager to attend the Commission sessions and monitor its work. Many organizations have appointed permanent representatives to the Commission who have attended the Commission sessions over a long period of time and have acquired considerable expertise and crucial personal relations within the Commission and the UN Secretariat. Furthermore, it rapidly became clear how the organizations could get their proposals on the Commission's agenda. Since only governments can be official members of the Commission, they have the exclusive right to propose items to the Commission's agenda. Utilizing their connections and negotiation skills, NGO representatives can, however, persuade the government representatives to adopt NGO proposals and submit them to the Commission.

This is how, throughout the years, countless issues have begun as NGO initiatives and ended up as UN resolutions and recommendations. Collaboration between representatives of NGOs and governments has been close and fruitful from the start, and the official delegates have in fact often been grateful for the well-prepared proposals submitted by the NGOs.

In 1987, based on experiences and outcomes of the International Women's Year (1975), the United Nations' Decade for Women (1976-85) and the Nairobi Conference (1985), the mandate of CSW was expanded to include activities such as the advocacy of equality, development and peace; monitoring the implementation of internationally agreed measures for the advancement of women; and reviewing and appraising progress at the international, subregional, sectoral and global levels (E/RES/1987/24).

- *Human Rights or "Rights of Man"?*

The active women present and CSW had a decisive role in the process of drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1946-48. Starting from the Declaration's preamble, they had to make sure that the phrase "equal rights of men and women" incorporated through

great effort in the UN Charter would not be watered down. Minerva Bernardino<sup>2</sup> of the Dominican Republic in particular was alert and called for an explicit phrase as it was not enough to use the term ‘everyone’ because "in certain countries the term ‘everyone’ did not necessarily mean every individual, regardless of sex." In the end, the countries even voted upon whether the Declaration should reproduce the exact phrase contained in the preamble to the UN Charter. The results of the vote were convincing – thirty-two in favour, two against and three abstentions.<sup>3</sup>

Women monitored the drafting of the Declaration paragraph by paragraph in order to prevent the inclusion of any sexist phrases. It took extensive debates to erase the word ‘man’ used in reference to all people. In fact, it was during this time that the English word ‘*man*’ was reinterpreted. The word ‘man’ represents gender, not species; it therefore excluded women, as was the interpretation of Ms. Bernardino. Thanks to the unyielding efforts of the women present, Article 1 of the Declaration now reads "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" instead of "All men..." The words ‘everyone’ or ‘no one’ are used throughout the final text instead of using the words ‘every man’ and ‘no man’.

However, there was still a problem, which remained unsolved. All along the text the masculine pronouns ‘he, him, his’ are used. After all, due to linguistic differences, this ‘universal’ declaration appears different in different translations. For instance in the languages like the Finnish these kind of ‘gender’ problems don’t appear, since the words including pronouns do not indicate any gender. The ‘gender cleaning’ or degenderization’ of the text is a particular task in each language.

Interviewed by *INSTRAW News* at the age of ninety, Minerva Bernardino said: "I am very proud to have been instrumental in changing the name of the Declaration of the ‘Rights of Man’ to the Declaration of Human Rights". She believed that the women who fought for the cause were "...conscious that they were making a revolution." The revolution continued in the 50s and had to do with other, more important language issues as well, such as the right to live with dignity. "In interpreting these words, we denounced, in the United Nations, the horrible mutilations of women in certain religious/cultural rituals in certain regions in Africa. We started a job that has not yet ended. Women have not really worked in solidarity to end it."

Minerva Bernardino placed special emphasis on *solidarity* "because it is the key to success. Just causes in general always win, I am convinced, but without solidarity you do not achieve your specific goals" (*INSTRAW News* 18/1992:15-17).

In hindsight one can only imagine what kind of a document the Universal Declaration of Human Rights might have been had it been written solely by men – even though the Commission was chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. The adoption of the Declaration by the

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<sup>2</sup> Minerva Bernardino (1907-1998) was a delegate of the Dominican Republic to the UN founding conference in San Francisco in 1945 and her country’s first UN ambassador until 1957. Her positions included the Chair of CSW and First Vice President of ECOSOC, and she was the only woman of those present at the UN founding conference who also took part in the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the UN in 1995 in San Francisco.

<sup>3</sup> The two countries that voted against were China and the United States.

General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 was a triumph and a defining moment for CSW. Ever since, CSW has used the Declaration as a basis for action for the promotion of the cause of equal rights and freedoms. In the UN, the Declaration has been the basis for codifying human rights into well-known legally binding international Conventions.

### 3. Human Rights are Women's Rights

The United Nations "Blue Book"<sup>4</sup> on the Advancement of Women divides the UN operations towards equality and the advancement of women into four different periods: Securing the legal foundations of equality 1945–1962; Recognising women's role in development 1963–1975; the UN Decade for Women 1976–1985; and Towards Equality, Development and Peace 1986 onwards (United Nations 1995).

#### *-The Legal Status of Women in the World*

The first task of CSW was to conduct a global survey on the status of women's rights. Thus, in fact, it took up the work where the League of Nations had left off a decade earlier. The questionnaire sent to governments was positively received, and 74 countries promptly provided their replies – including countries that at that stage were not even members of the UN. The survey revealed that four areas were found to be of particular concern:

- i- political rights and the possibility to exercise them;
- ii- legal rights of women, both as individuals and as family members;
- iii- access of girls and women to education and training, including vocational training;
- iv- working life.

By the year 1962, several conventions were prepared by the UN, UNESCO and ILO in all four areas of concern. The most significant of these include the Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (1949), the Convention Concerning Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value (ILO 1951), the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952), the Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (1957), the International Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO 1960), and the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age of Marriage, and Registration of Marriages (1962).

The subjects and history of these conventions are a sad reflection of the central problems of the lives of women in the first half of this century. For instance, in many countries political rights of women were not self-evident in the 1940s, and were in force in only 30 of the 51 countries which signed the UN Charter. Marriage also involved enormous problems for women, placing them in a situation where regulations on several related issues were

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<sup>4</sup> The "Blue Book" refers to the United Nations Blue Book Series. Volume VI of this series is on The United Nations and the Advancement of Women 1945-1995. This publication is a collection of the most important documents and resolutions on women in the United Nations in the period 1945-1995.

non-existent or insufficient. This called for an international convention that obliged the Member States to create legislation regarding consent to marriage, minimum age of marriage and registration of marriages. If a marriage was not registered, i.e., legitimized, the wife had no security and she could be abandoned at any time, thrown out of her home and separated from her family.

- *The Right to Family Planning - a New Human Right*

The women's indirect two-way strategy has been effectively used in connection with the right to family planning, women's right over their own body, i.e., to decide on the number and spacing of their children. Although this issue was not discussed when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drawn up, it has become a generally recognized basic human right which has undoubtedly had a major impact on the advancement of women's status and lives during this century. Women's right and means to control their own fertility also decidedly improves their possibilities to control their lives in general and exercise other human rights such as the right to education and training and economic activities of their own, to participate in the political, cultural and social life in their countries.

The right to family planning is a latecomer when compared with women's political and legal rights. As late as the 1960s, it was still a very new issue all over the world. However, it rapidly gained support within the women's movement of the industrialized countries. The UN and the densely populated countries – with India already in the forefront– soon took an interest in the issue because population growth was more and more commonly regarded as a major problem in many countries and globally. However, family planning became an issue of serious controversy within the UN where it was categorically opposed by many catholic countries led by the Holy See. The other strongholds of resistance were the Islamic countries.

The right to family planning was included for the first time as a human right in the *Declaration of Teheran* (13 May 1968) which resulted from the International Conference on Human Rights. In the following year it was included in the *Declaration on Social Progress and Development* by the UN General Assembly (11 December 1967). In the 1970s the issue was constantly wrestled over at the General Assembly and World Conferences.

It was also suggested that specialized agencies such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) should start training their personnel in the promotion of and education in family planning for women and provide them with contraceptives. The countries opposing these ideas reacted by threatening to withdraw all their support to these agencies if they included family planning in their programmes.

The political controversies managed to slow down the process but not to bring it to a standstill. Women's organizations and development agencies continued to support and demand family planning. American development aid organizations and politicians in particular regarded birth control in the developing countries as the most important form of development aid. Women delegates to UN conferences and women's NGOs created networks with UN organizations and kept the issue moving in practice, while the disputes in the General



Assembly still persisted. The women activists saw this as a major interest of women in general, not just in the developing countries.

The right to family planning was taken up again in the first UN World Population Conference in 1974. Very definite formulations on the issue were adopted in the World Conference of the International Women's Year (IWY) in Mexico 1975 and included in both the World Plan of Action and the Declaration of Mexico: "Every couple and every individual has the right to decide freely and responsibly whether or not to have children as well as to determine their number and spacing, and to have information, education and means to do so"(Declaration of Mexico).

The right to family planning is included in a more specific form in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) which reaffirmed this right as a binding obligation to the States Members. The next important step forward in the process was taken in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo 1994 and the Beijing Platform for Action. The new formulation and expanded understanding of the issue were assumed in Cairo, where the concepts of "Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health" were defined and adopted.

According to the Cairo Programme, "Reproductive health implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. Implicit in this are the rights of men and women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice" (paragraphs 7.2 and 7.3). Reproductive health and rights receive even more precise and extensive formulation in the Beijing Platform for Action, which reconfirms the definitions formulated in Cairo (paragraphs 94-96).

A heated discussion took place in Beijing on the concept of *sexual rights*, which was supposed to cover all of the above and in addition the issue of various sexual orientations. The concept itself was not acceptable to many countries and it was not adopted, but the essential substance as adopted in Cairo and further developed in Beijing was finally adopted within the whole document with consensus. However, 12 catholic countries, the Holy See and 19 Islamic countries expressed their reservations to particularly listed paragraphs related to this issue in the final document.

Along with the right to family planning, another basic human right becomes a reality: *the right to be born a wanted child*. It is easy to understand how infinitely important this is as a fundamental human right at the very beginning of a new life. It has an immeasurable human value, and a recent study in Finland has shed new light on its physical and practical importance. For example, the risk of being born prematurely is lower with children wanted by their parents, they are breast-fed longer, and they have fewer mental problems later on in their lives than unwanted children. The study also reveals that in 1966 twelve per cent of children were born unwanted in Finland whereas in 1988 the corresponding figure had dropped to one per cent, and the number of premature babies had also halved during the same period (Järvelin 1997).

In practice, the right and opportunity to family planning is an asset for whole families, men, women and children the world over. It is important even from the economic point of view, because it facilitates the economic planning in families to provide better conditions, nourishment, care, housing and education for the children they choose to have.

Along with the appropriate implementation of the policies for reproductive health and rights even controversial problems such as abortion and teenage pregnancies can become easier to solve. In Finland illegal abortions and teenage pregnancies have disappeared since 1970, when the new abortion law was enacted and the education and services for family planning extensively improved. For a few years the number of legal abortions increased, but soon they started to decline - due to unwanted pregnancies going down - and now the abortion rate in Finland is one of the lowest in the world (15 per 100 live births in 1993).

The right to family planning is an excellent example of an issue pushed on many fronts over a decade. From 1968 onwards it was brought up in every relevant context at the UN conferences and in the resolutions – despite often forceful protests. Debate over the issue expanded rapidly in national and international media, women’s magazines as well as flyers, development aid publications, etc.

The Plans of Action adopted by the UN Population Conference in 1974 and the International Women’s Year Conference in 1975 included clear principles regarding the issue, and it was established as an obligation of international law in 1979 into the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women which so far has been ratified by a record number of 161 countries. The latest contention over women’s reproductive rights took place at the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995.

This difficult and passion-provoking issue could not have been pushed forward this quickly without women’s collaboration across borders and past governments. Nevertheless, the struggle to achieve the practical implementation is still going on, even in countries that have ratified the Convention. In this struggle, the Convention together with the Plans of Action adopted by UN world conferences have proved indispensable tools for women in their efforts to press governments for the actual implementation of the decisions they have jointly made on this inalienable right.

- *Convention on the Rights of Women*

From women's point of view the single most important international legal instrument adopted by the UN is, however, the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, or in short the *Convention on the Rights of Women*.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, it is not a question of any specific women's rights but essentially about the fact that the universal human rights which both the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights confirm as rights which all people, both men and women, are entitled to, are still not enjoyed equally by women and men. If this was the case, no convention on the elimination of discrimination against women would have been needed. The very necessity of this Convention is revealing and paradoxical – the Convention against discrimination bears witness to the continued persistence of discrimination.

The predecessor of the Convention was the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women which was initiated by CSW in 1963, following several occasions where the General Assembly had recognized that human rights were not realized equally between men and women. This was the beginning of a process similar to those required for the production of many other UN conventions. The first step is the preparation of a declaration, a recommendation by nature but already encompassing the essentials of the issue. This Declaration was adopted in 1967. (See Annex II)

The preparation of the actual Convention started in 1973 and resulted in a draft to be adopted by the General Assembly and becoming a part of international law binding to the countries that ratify it. Even though this multistage process towards a convention takes time, it is often needed and useful in order to mature the views of decision-makers in the UN and Member States alike towards the acceptance of an issue that may imply fundamental changes in values and legislation. A UN process of this nature can even serve the purpose of shaping public opinion worldwide.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women is a concise and comprehensive conclusion to the process, which had taken place within the UN system for more than thirty years, to incorporate the principles of women's rights and gender equality into the provisions of international law. It includes, in their most precise form, all provisions aiming at the elimination of discrimination against women previously covered by separate conventions. It also contains provisions covering issues that had been omitted from earlier conventions. Therefore it also recognizes the above-mentioned right to family planning as one of the basic human rights and incorporates it into the provisions of international law.

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<sup>5</sup> The significance of an international convention lies in the fact that it reinforces a universally adopted legal norm on the issue concerned. It provides a cross-national and indisputable justification for the efforts of NGOs, women's movement and legislators when they work towards exposing of human rights violations and call for their rectification in their respective countries. An international convention provides indisputable grounds for demanding that the convention be ratified and that corresponding national legislation to remedy the grievances be created by governments. Without an internationally adopted framework, the work towards the advancement of women's legal and social status would in many countries be even more difficult than it is today.

The Convention was unanimously adopted in 1979 and entered into force two years later in 1981 following ratification by the required twenty countries. Ratified by 161 countries by the end of 1997, the Convention has become one of the most widely ratified UN human rights conventions.

In addition, the Convention provides for follow-up by the UN regarding the practical implementation in the member states. It calls for the establishment of the UN *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)* to which the States Parties to the Convention are obliged to report on the progress of its implementation every four years. CEDAW also has the right to invite governments individually to a hearing about their measures towards the implementation of the provisions.

CEDAW is composed of twenty-three experts of high moral standing and competence elected by States Parties for a term of four years. The candidates for the election are nominated by the states that have ratified the Convention. The members of the Committee serve in their personal capacity, not as representatives of their governments.

The Nordic countries seek to conform their national legislation to the convention before the ratification of a new international convention. Consequently, for example, in Finland the ratification of the CEDAW Convention took six years. However, ratification of the Convention does not necessarily guarantee its implementation. Nonetheless, the Convention provides an invaluable instrument for women in all countries as they work towards the development of legislation and the elimination of discrimination against women worldwide.

These days the governments of some countries also consult representatives of women's organizations and arrange hearings regarding the report under preparation before submitting it to the UN. Women's organizations can also send CEDAW their "shadow report" on their views of their government's actions towards the implementation of the Convention. Furthermore, an Optional Protocol to the Convention providing CEDAW with the mandate to hear complaints of individual citizens and concerned NGOs about violations against the Convention is currently under review.

#### - *The Missing Link in the Chain*

A hole waiting to be filled has, however, been discovered in this multitude of work and the extensive network of women's rights. During the past ten years there has been a growing awareness within the UN system of a missing link: violence against women. When the Convention on the Rights of Women was being prepared, this issue was overlooked both in the UN and elsewhere. Consequently, the Convention does not include a single mention of violence against women.

However, since the 1985 Nairobi Conference to review and appraise the achievements of the UN Decade of Women, the UN has headed the discussion with which the wall of silence surrounding the issue of violence against women has been broken. In 1993 the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women after a

long and thorough preparation process directed by CSW. The Declaration may be yet another first step towards the preparation of a binding Convention on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, as suggested by Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his message on the International Women's Day in 1995 (United Nations 1995b: paragraph 219).

In fact, the countries of Latin America are ahead also in this issue. The Organization of American States, OAS has adopted already in 1994 the Inter-American Convention on Violence against Women (known as the Convention of Belem do Para). It entered into effect in 1995 and presently has 29 ratifications by member states out of an organization of 35 members. This was possible because the OAS has capacity to develop treaties. This could be an advisable example also to other regional organizations of the states, for example like the Council Europe.

The decisive impetus towards broader progress in this issue was, however, provided by the Platform of Action adopted by the Beijing Conference, with one of its key objectives being *"the elimination of all forms of violence against women."* As many as three of the total of twelve strategic objectives of the Platform of Action are directly connected with the elimination of open, physical violence against women and girls (Violence against women, Women and armed conflict, The girl-child). The detection and elimination of economic, structural, social and cultural violence runs throughout the entire Platform of Action.

As part of the process to implement the Beijing Platform of Action, four significant conferences took place in 1997 dealing with violence against women from a totally new viewpoint. The issue was addressed by a conference organized by the Swedish Government in Stockholm in January and at the regional level in the seminar by the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in June. The *Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)* organized a Conference on Domestic Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean in Washington in October, and UNESCO held an Expert Group Meeting on Male Roles and Masculinity in the Perspective of a Culture of Peace in Oslo in September.

These conferences were unique in regarding violence against women as part of the violence of the male culture. The focus is on its reasons and the violent nature of the current male culture in general, how destructive it is upon men themselves and upon the entire culture. Now it is men's turn to analyze from a gender perspective their own lives and their status in culture and society. This should also clarify why life in the prevailing male role is often so restricted, poor and harsh. Men also need to study how culture and society should be changed in order to liberate them from their straitjacket. And when we reach the situation where the man no longer batters, the woman no longer becomes a victim, either.

These conferences concluded that the world community should aim towards a culture of peace where violence would merely be an exceptional phenomenon and disordered behaviour among the human species. Furthermore, the creation of a culture of peace requires the involvement of both men and women. As if a culmination of the recommendations and conclusions reached by these conferences, the General Assembly made a unanimous decision in November 1997 to declare the year 2000 *the International Year for the Culture of Peace*, thus providing the best possible framework for the advancement of this issue amongst others (Pietilä 1997).

#### **4. The United Nations Decade for Women (1976–1985) – a Decade of Development**

As described above, in the early decades of the UN women's collaboration with the UN and the measures taken towards the advancement of women focused above all on improving women's legal status and taking women into account in the implementation of human rights. A critical change began in the early 1970s: Until then women had first and foremost been the objects of UN support and measures, whereas this was the start of realizing that women had a central, even critical, role as active subjects and actors in relation to many development problems.

##### *- New Trends with New States in the UN*

With the proportion of developing countries growing amongst the UN member states, development issues became increasingly pronounced on the UN agenda. As early as the 1960s, developing countries had begun to shift the focus from political and security issues to development issues in the UN. The world food situation was quite critical again in the early 1970s, and at the same time it was also understood that something had to be done with the explosive population growth. These problems forced the UN system to realize that women were the key factor in the solution of both of these issues. Unless the situation of women is addressed and their status and conditions improved, there is no hope for the alleviation of the food and population problems. Thus the hard facts of the world situation brought women into the spotlight.

At the same time, the feminist movement was growing strong and becoming very active in the industrialized countries. The excitement caused by the new discipline, women's studies, brought the status and thoughts of women into public discussion, which was also reflected in the UN, together with the world situation. Kurt Waldheim, appointed Secretary-General in 1971, faced demands from many quarters to increase the proportion of women in the UN Secretariat and, above all, in the senior positions. The UN, approaching its thirtieth anniversary, still had not seen a single woman in the top positions of the organization.

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) had for several years tried to transfer the attention from the conference tables of New York and Geneva to the women in the villages and rice fields of the developing countries. However, the first International Development Strategy adopted in the UN for the Second International Development Decade, 1970–1980 only included a subordinate clause about women. CSW's impressive countermove was to propose to the General Assembly a comprehensive resolution outlining "A Programme of concerted international action for the advancement of women" to be implemented during the Decade. The resolution was unanimously adopted on 15 December 1970 [A/RES/2715 (XXV)].

In early 1972, the Secretary-General appointed Helvi Sipilä from Finland as the first female UN Assistant Secretary-General. In the autumn of the same year, the General Assembly declared the year 1975 as International Women's Year with the objective of focusing attention on the status of women both within the UN System and in the Member States. In addition, two years later, in autumn 1974, a decision was made to organize the World Conference of the International Women's Year in Mexico City in 1975. All these decisions and events set off an unstoppable avalanche.

*- International Women's Year (IWY) as an Engine for Change*

International Women's Year (IWY) is an exceptionally successful example of an NGO initiative taken up by the UN and resulting in a massive mobilization process. The *Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)* was one of the organizations actively utilizing their consultative status in CSW. In the early 1970s WIDF's president was Hertta Kuusinen from Finland who also represented her organization as an observer at the Commission. She brought to the March 1972 session of the Commission a proposal of the WIDF requesting the proclamation of an "International Women's Year" in order to bring the needs and views of women to the attention of the UN System and the world.

The proposal of the WIDF was backed by other NGO observers, and the Romanian delegate with the support of her government presented the proposal to the Commission. Helvi Sipilä, the Finnish government representative at that time, seconded the proposal and thus the Commission decided to recommend to the General Assembly the proclamation of 1975 as International Women's Year. The General Assembly adopted the recommendation in December 1972.

International Women's Year 1975 (IWY) was just one in the series of UN theme years, most of which had hardly been noticed. The General Assembly adopted IWY with scepticism and reluctance, but women and women's organizations welcomed it with enthusiasm. It came at a time when many other factors were converging in the same direction; the problems of women finally had to be taken into consideration, and their role in the development of each and every country recognized. Thus IWY became a framework within which these issues could be the objects of global attention and, at the same time, it highlighted the previously ignored aspects of many issues in such a way that it was no longer possible to forget or deny them. Therefore the success of the IWY exceeded all expectations, and it brought the UN into the minds of broader circles of the world's women.

IWY provided the UN with a framework within which women's needs and views could be promoted. It proved an excellent tool which the new Assistant Secretary-General Helvi Sipilä used efficiently within the UN System to justify in every possible context the measures towards the advancement of women. It also provided the NGOs operating within and outside the UN system with excellent further impetus in their efforts on behalf of women the world over.

IWY, in fact, had significant influence before it even began. The preparations for two important UN world conferences were already well under way when the decision on IWY was taken. These were the World Population Conference to be held in Bucharest and the World Food Conference to be held in Rome, both in 1974. These were addressing the two key issues from the point of view of women, population and food.

When Helvi Sipilä started as the Assistant Secretary-General in 1972, she became involved in the preparations of the World Population Conference. Thanks to her personal efforts, the preparatory committee realized that no population policy could be effective without the involvement of women. An unofficial preparatory meeting was organized, to which Ms Sipilä invited one prominent woman from each member country, and 116 women attended. It became an international lobbying conference to ensure that the government delegations would include women who were prepared to see to it that due consideration was given in the conference proceedings to the involvement of women and their interests in these issues.

The preparations for the World Food Conference were at an advanced stage in the FAO when the decision on the proclamation of IWY was adopted. FAO already had a special household and nutrition section which was well aware of the vital role of women in food production, especially in Africa. With the Food Conference approaching, the NGOs, including the International Peace Research Association's Food Policy Study group got organized and arranged a meeting, in Rome, which succeeded in influencing the official Conference that followed. As a consequence, the Conference adopted an extensive and comprehensive resolution on 'Women and Food' which indicated the multitude of fields in which women were needed and able to contribute to the improvement of world food supply, for which they needed to have better access to land, education, technology and funding.

Most of the eleven other world conferences on the major topics organized by the UN in the 1970s by no means managed to take women into account this well. On the contrary, in the 1970s it was entirely a matter of chance if women's voice was heard in the 'male enclaves' of these major conferences which aimed at assessing the global situation and drawing up long-term action plans for the key problem areas of development (Palmer 1980).

The primarily male delegations did not address women's contribution and needs, even when they were provided with excellent background material. A case in point was the Water Conference held in Mar del Plata in 1977 for which both the UN Secretariat and the FAO had prepared outstanding documents on women being, in many countries, the only existing "water supply system" as they literally carry the water required by their villages for drinking, cleaning and irrigation, often from distant locations. The final documents adopted by the conference did not include a word about women's crucial role in water issues.

A decisive factor to the outcome of the conferences in the 1970s was whether or not a delegation happened to include an informed and active woman who would take the initiative – preferably beforehand, during her government's preparation process – and get women's issues to the discussion table. As a member of a delegation, even a single woman would be in a position to succeed in preparing a draft resolution or amendment on women's concern to the conference papers and persuade her delegation to introduce it in the conference - whereas for



the NGOs, participating at a parallel conference, it was very difficult or almost impossible to make an impact on the official conference proceedings (Pietilä & Vickers 1996:84-95).

- *The UN World Conferences on Women 1975, 1980 and 1985*

The UN World Conferences for the advancement of women in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985) were part and parcel of the series of world conferences organized by the UN in the 1970s. Each one of them was, however, unique in character, starting from the first one held in Mexico.

The 1975 World Conference of the International Women's Year in Mexico City was the first ever global intergovernmental conference specifically organized to address women's issues and world problems from a women's perspective. Even though it cannot be called a women's conference since the official participants were government representatives, it was still the first major UN conference in which a vast majority (73 percent) of the 1,200 delegates were women, and where as many as 113 delegations of the total of 133 were headed by a woman. (Although the proportion of men among the delegates was higher, 27 percent, than was the usual proportion of women at other UN conferences at that time!)

The World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of International Women's Year adopted by the Conference was intended as a programme for the advancement of women to be implemented during the forthcoming decade in all areas and all countries. It crystallized the past and present long-term objectives of the women's movement within three thematic areas: *Equality – Development – Peace*, which then became the overall theme of the UN Decade for Women and of all of the other world conferences on women. Right from the beginning, these objectives have been regarded as internally interrelated and mutually reinforcing, so that the advancement of one contributes to the advancement of the others. This is emphasized throughout the document (United Nations 1976).

When endorsing the Declaration of Mexico and the World Plan of Action in autumn 1975, the General Assembly proclaimed the entire decade 1976–1985 the *United Nations Decade for Women*, the objectives of which were the ones set forth in the World Plan of Action. With the same resolution the General Assembly also established the *International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW)*, in principle. The decision was also made to hold a mid-decade conference in Copenhagen in 1980 to review and appraise the achievements during the first five years and further specify the objectives for the remainder of the Decade.

The experiences gained, obstacles encountered and results achieved during the entire UN Decade for Women were thoroughly assessed and evaluated at the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace in Nairobi in 1985. The evaluation showed that the objectives set forth in Mexico had not been achieved during the Decade, but that plenty of other significant things had been accomplished instead.

One of the major achievements of the UN Decade for Women was that the situation of the world's women was better mapped than ever before. During the Decade the UN System collected an enormous amount of information, facts and figures on the lives, problems and conditions of women in different countries. This brought up the problem that, as a rule, national and international statistics did not provide gender-disaggregated data, and thus it was impossible to get a real picture of the disparities between men and women. Therefore the UN requested that the Member States renew their statistics and provide the UN with data disaggregated by sex. Thus the scale of inequality and discrimination would become more visible and women's contributions to society better acknowledged. The invisibilities of women's lives would start to become visible.

Another great step forward during the UN Decade for Women was that the very concept of development came under critical scrutiny from the point of view of women for the first time ever. Before the Nairobi Conference two comprehensive surveys on development were produced. The UN General Assembly decided in 1981 that an interdisciplinary and multisectoral World Survey should be prepared on the role of women in overall development.

An alternative report on development was produced by the group *Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)* about a year before the Nairobi conference. The group was established and convened in Bangalore in August 1984 on the invitation of Devaki Jain, a well-known development economist and thinker from India. It was a group of researchers and activists from the South who brought together their experiences with development strategies, policies, theories, and research. Their point of departure was the awareness "of the need to question in a more fundamental way the underlying processes of development into which we have been attempting to integrate women". ([DAWN Report, 1985, 11](#))

Both of these reports were produced parallel to each other and they consisted of the analyses of the dominating pattern of development as it had been brought up in the industrial world and in their policies in the so called Third World. The DAWN report, *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions*, expressed its criticism in a very straightforward manner. The UN publication *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development* is more diplomatic and concealed. However, they support each other and their basic message is the same: Development in the past and present does not serve the needs of women, neither does it correspond to women's values and aspirations.

These reports were prepared for the Nairobi Conference and became very important background documents. They also represented a turning point in the history of women's issues in the UN system. They brought the role of women in development into focus as an indispensable new dimension and they made the prevailing pattern of development questionable from the point of view of women.

When the General Assembly endorsed the *Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (NFLS)* in autumn 1985 it also decided that the world surveys on the role of women in development would be prepared every five years as part of the follow up of the implementation of decisions in Nairobi.

In general, attitudes towards women began to change both within the UN system and the Member States as a result of the UN Decade for Women. A manifestation of this was the fact that the NFLS were adopted by consensus by 157 member states whereas the earlier conferences had resorted to a vote. A final document adopted by consensus is always more strongly binding to the governments than one based on a majority vote (United Nations 1985).

Since the objectives of the UN Decade for Women had not been achieved in ten years, setting new objectives was not deemed necessary. Instead, the NFLS document includes new, improved strategies for the attainment of the goals of the UN Decade for Women by the year 2000. Thus the UN Decade for Women will in a way continue until the year 2000.

- *INSTRAW and UNIFEM emerged out of Mexico*

Until the 1970s there was only one small unit within the administration of the UN system to focus on women's interests and needs, the Branch for the Advancement of Women, which later evolved into the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW). During the Conference in Mexico City this was found to be inadequate in maintaining the momentum created around the world by the International Women's Year and the World Conference. The need to strengthen the institutional structures devoted to women within the UN system was articulated very strongly by the delegates at the Conference.

The delegates made a move for the establishment of a special fund for the decade 1976-1985, which then was to become the Voluntary Fund for the UN Decade for Women. They also adopted a resolution (resolution 26) to the effect of the establishment of an international research and training institute for the advancement of women.

Both of these proposals were founded on the promising prospects of funding. First of all, it appeared that there would be some money left over in the IWY Trust Fund which had been created through voluntary contributions from the Member States for the financing of the IWY and the Mexico Conference. They were also encouraged by some lofty pledges made in the Conference. The most promising was from Iran, a pledge of US\$1 million for the Fund and other purposes and another US\$ 1 million for the proposed research and training institute which at that point was planned to be established in Teheran.

After a series of complicated procedures, the Voluntary Fund for the UN Decade for Women was officially established in 1976 to give support to "the poorest women in the poorest countries" in their efforts to implement the goals of the *World Plan of Action*. When the Decade ended in 1985, the mandate of the Fund was expanded to become the *United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)*, a separate and identifiable entity within the UN system in autonomous association with the UNDP in New York. It has three primary objectives: to provide direct support for women's projects, to promote women's participation in the decision-making of mainstream development programmes and to support the economic and social objectives and equality of women in the developing world (Snyder 1995:25-28).

In addition to governments' voluntary contributions, women in different countries have also started to raise funds for the work of UNIFEM. This activity has been formalized by way of establishing UNIFEM National Committees to raise funds for the support of UNIFEM and disseminate information about its work. These Committees now exist in 18 countries and their annual contributions total some US\$ 300,000 for the work of UNIFEM.

The *International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW)* was established in principle by the General Assembly with the same resolution which endorsed the World Plan of Action and the Declaration of Mexico (3520(xxx) of 15 December 1975). The formal decision on the establishment of INSTRAW was made by ECOSOC (Council resolution 1998 (LX) of 12 May 1976). Due to political developments in Iran, the original plan of locating the Institute in Teheran did not materialize.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it took some time before the Institute became operative in practice. It initiated operations in the beginning of the 1980s in New York and finally found its permanent seat in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, in 1983.<sup>7</sup>

According to its Statute, INSTRAW is an autonomous institution within the framework of the United Nations. Its activities cover all member countries of the UN, both industrial as well as developing countries. Its main task is to promote and conduct policy research and studies that will enhance the effective integration and mobilization of women in the process of development and in the formulation, design and implementation of development activities at all levels. It also conducts training for policy makers and development planners as well as women's organizations to develop sex-disaggregated data and quantify women's work and contributions to societal development.

INSTRAW advocates networking within and outside the UN system. Within the UN system special importance is given to cooperation between INSTRAW and the regional commissions of the Economic and Social Council and the other UN research and training institutes. In its strategic work plan for the new millennium, INSTRAW plans to expand its role to respond to global change and emerging needs.<sup>8</sup>

With the view of extending its scope and strengthening its relationships with Member States INSTRAW has established a network of National Focal Points which exist today in about 50 countries. A Focal Point constitutes working links between INSTRAW and governmental bodies, the research community and women's organizations in the country concerned and INSTRAW. At best these Focal Points can function like outstretched arms of INSTRAW reaching to women in member countries.

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<sup>6</sup> The contribution pledged by Iran, however, was made available to the Trust Fund of the Institute.

<sup>7</sup> A support office was maintained in New York, but as of 1992 it was strengthened as a Liaison Office for the purpose not only of maintaining close contact with the Permanent Missions, but of facilitating inter-agency coordination and expanding INSTRAW's outreach within and beyond the UN system.

<sup>8</sup> The most salient aspects of the Institute's new strategy include a network to link women's studies programmes and research institutes internationally and to serve as an information center on WID issues both within and outside the UN.

INSTRAW is funded exclusively through voluntary contributions from Member States, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, foundations and private sources. It is not entitled to financing through regular contributions of the Member States, which is the method of funding for most of the UN agencies. Neither is it funded by a particular endowment fund as is the case with some of the other UN research institutions. These ambiguities in financing have seriously hampered the possibilities of INSTRAW to reach the scope and role it was hoped to have and that it should have as the only institution bringing the research contribution on women and by women into the UN system.

In 1993, a possible merger of INSTRAW and UNIFEM was under consideration by some member states. The proposal, however, was not accepted by the General Assembly, which requested that the matter be further examined. The World Conference in Beijing reconfirmed that INSTRAW and UNIFEM definitely have different mandates and tasks within the UN system. The distribution of labour between them is also clarified in the way the *Platform for Action* allots their tasks. For INSTRAW it assigns, among other things, the work to "identify research to be given priority, strengthen national capacities to carry out women's studies and gender research, and develop networks of research institutions that can be mobilized for that purpose". These are tasks which only a research institution can carry out (Paragraphs 334 and 335 in PFA).

Today the work and resources of the gender related institutions within the UN system should be seen against the framework whereby the whole UN system has taken the obligation of mainstreaming the gender perspective into all their policies and programmes. This obligation has been elaborated in the programmes of action of the world conferences and in particular in the System-wide Medium-term Plans which are prepared for every five years beginning from 1990. The second *System-wide Medium-Term Plan for the Advancement of Women 1996-2001* was revised and endorsed by ECOSOC in 1996 (ECOSOC 1996/34. See also Pietilä & Vickers 1996:107-116). The latest and most far-reaching decision in this respect was made by ECOSOC in 1997 when endorsing the report of the Secretary General on the coordination of United Nations system activities for mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes of the United Nations system. (See also section 6 of this paper.)

#### - *Women's World Conferences*

The parallel NGO fora held in connection with the intergovernmental conferences on women became the real world conferences of women themselves. From the beginning these parallel events organized by NGOs – mainly women's organizations, researchers and activists in the women's movement – gained proportions totally different from those of the NGO conferences held in connection with the other UN conferences.

The IWY Tribune organized in Mexico City in 1975 had approximately 4,000 participants, while the official conference had about 1,200 delegates. In the 1980 NGO Forum in Copenhagen there were some 7,000 participants, and the number of participants five years later at the 1985 Nairobi Forum broke all records and totalled some 16,000.

Organizing a large NGO Forum in connection with UN world conferences became common by the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> The programme of the parallel events are compiled by the NGOs and participating groups themselves. The forum consists of events arranged by the organizations, seminars, lectures, workshops, exhibitions, even theatre, concerts and other artistic performances. The international planning committee makes the arrangements for facilities and locations for the suggested events and organizes some large-scale plenary gatherings. Massive events like this are also characterized by a constant flow of improvised meetings, happenings, demonstrations, processions, etc.

For example, some 125 workshops and meetings were scheduled each day at the Nairobi Forum '85 – about 1,200 altogether in ten days – and there was a constant flow of improvised gatherings, discussions, group meetings of all kinds in all places. Networks were being sown on the green lawns of the Nairobi University campus, under the trees here and there, in the Peace tent, in hotels and dormitories – no one knows the total extent of such activities.

What distinguishes the Women's NGO fora is the enthusiasm of all the participants. They are characterized by women actively doing things, organizing, participating, presenting, discussing - and also singing, dancing and performing – not just passively sitting and listening as is generally the case in so many conferences. The participants are all natural "experts" on being women and on women's lives in their countries. Therefore the exchange of information and experiences is so easy, and all are interested in also sharing the research and knowledge presented by researchers on women's conditions and lives from all over the world. It is at these fora that the separation of theory and practice is eliminated as both contribute to the enrichment of the total experience.

At Nairobi Forum '85 the strength and dignity of African women made an unforgettable impression upon Europeans who ages ago had consented to being 'only women'. The African women's visible awareness of their own dignity, their handsome appearance and colourful clothes, were a clear signal that they were not the 'second sex' but the first in their world - as European eyes perceived it there. The Nairobi Forum was also the first one of these large conferences where the proportion of participants from different parts of the world was becoming more balanced. There were so many women from Asia and Africa and their contribution was so impressive that white western women were no longer dominant.

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<sup>9</sup> The first large parallel conference was held in connection with the United Nations Conference on Human Environment (UNCHE) in Stockholm in 1972. As there appeared to exist great interest amongst women both at international and national levels to come and follow the UN World Conferences on Women, an organization appropriate to respond to this interest was created. NGOs observing UN operations permanently in accordance with their consultative status had a coordination committee for their work in New York, called the Conference of NGOs (CONGO). Under the auspices of CONGO, a special planning and preparatory committee was established to organize and prepare at the international level the participation of NGOs in the conferences on women. Upon its initiative, preparatory committees were established in each host country (Mexico City, Copenhagen, Nairobi) in collaboration with the local NGOs with the task of seeing to the practical arrangements.

The NGOs wishing to engage in constant observation of the UN operations can apply to ECOSOC for a *consultative status*. These organizations can also get accredited as observers to the official UN world conferences. This way they gain access to the official documents and the conference sessions. This method of participation has been available to NGOs since the founding of the UN.

However, NGO Fora are not merely one big celebration. It was apparent in Nairobi that the experiences gained in Mexico City and Copenhagen had taught women a lot about influencing the intergovernmental conferences. In many countries women had been active beforehand, lobbying their governments and expressing their suggestions to the governmental bodies as they had already learned that it is extremely difficult to influence intergovernmental decisions on the spot during a world conference. Therefore, it should be done beforehand in each country.

Women's international communication is crucial to the success of their efforts. The better the NGOs prepare their initiatives and tactics in collaboration across borders, the greater the number of governments receiving parallel suggestions from the NGOs in their country. Nevertheless, it is also important to be present at the conference itself, to monitor and witness the progress of the pre-prepared process. The NGO Fora also have an indirect impact on the official UN conferences through the atmosphere and impressions conveyed to the official delegates and, through them, to the course of the conferences.

There was a feeling at the Nairobi Forum that this kind of world conference of women should be organized independently and irrespectively of the intergovernmental conferences. While at that time only a dream in the minds of many participants, the idea started to live and evolve.

In the summer of 1987 a World Congress of Women was organized in Moscow by the *Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)*, bringing together more than 3,000 women from all over the world and reviving the spirit of Nairobi. In summer 1988 a Nordic Women's Forum '88 was organized by Nordic women's organizations in collaboration with the Nordic Council of Ministers and their governments in Oslo, Norway, and attended by some 10,000 women from the Nordic countries and from other parts of the world. In between, there have been smaller events such as the International Interdisciplinary Congresses on Women held every three years in different parts of the world.

The impetus behind all these events is the international women's movement which is also invisibly alive and influential in the minds of more and more women. In many countries it is nourished by women's research which provides new information and indisputable arguments for the use of women in building their awareness and making women's invisible world visible to all.

*- The United Nations Decade for Women Changed the World*

The UN Decade for Women was the most successful of all the UN theme decades. The time was right and ripe for it. The process which began to mature in the early 1970s became concrete in Mexico City in 1975, underwent mid-term stocktaking in Copenhagen in 1980, and was established as an acknowledged part of the UN operational agenda in Nairobi in 1985.

Much took place during and due to the UN Decade for Women 1976–1985. Women's awareness and self-confidence increased everywhere. At the world conferences women had

also reached out to each other across borders; global sisterhood was becoming a reality, and at home it was passed on to those who were not present at the world conferences.

Women's contribution to development and the advancement of women was also addressed in the UN Development Strategies for the UN Third and Fourth Development Decades in the 1980s and 1990s and, in addition to the world conferences on women, in numerous other major UN conferences, for instance in the Resolution on Women and Industrialization in the Third General Conference of UNIDO in New Delhi 1980. A decisive change took place in the perspective from which UN debates and documents addressed women.

In the early years of the UN women had been seen as objects whose legal status and situation needed to be improved in a paternalistic manner. The 1970s brought into the discussions the potential contribution of women to development efforts in each country. The phrase "integration of women into development" was adopted, and women were seen as a resource the utilization of which should be intensified. For this purpose it was necessary to improve not just the status but also the nutrition, health and training of women.

However, women were still in a way seen as instruments, and it was even claimed to be "a waste of human resources" if women were not fully integrated into the so-called development efforts. The human dignity and rights of women were not yet seen as a value in their own right. Then, a trend towards seeing women as equals, "as agents and beneficiaries in all sectors and at all levels of the development process", finally emerged in the International Development Strategy for the Third Development Decade of the UN in the 1980s.

The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies represented in many ways a turning point in the entire history of women in the UN. The NFLS recognize women as "intellectuals, policy-makers, decision-makers, planners and contributors, and beneficiaries of development", and obligate both Member States and the UN System to take this into consideration in policy and practice. The essential principle of the NFLS is formulated in paragraph 16 which explains what a women's perspective means:

*"The need for women's perspective on human development is critical, since it is in the interest of human enrichment and progress to introduce and weave into the social fabric women's concept of equality, their choices between alternative development strategies and their approach to peace, in accordance with their aspirations, interests and talents. These things are not only desirable in themselves but are also essential for the attainment of the goals and objectives of the Decade."*

Since the 1980s, the UN reports, programmes and resolutions have begun to reflect the recognition and understanding of the fact that *women's equitable participation in all walks of life is no longer only their legitimate right but a social and political necessity in the process towards a more balanced, humane and sustainable future.*



## 5. All Issues are Women's Issues

Women's enthusiastic participation in the parallel events to the UN world conferences shows extensively and concretely how active and interested women all over the world are in their own issues. This has also been a manifestation of women's great expectations and faith in the potential of the United Nations.

As described above, it was a matter of chance whether women's voice was articulated and heard at the intergovernmental conferences in the 1970s and 1980s. This depended on whether there happened to be at the conference itself or its preparatory phases (official delegations, parallel conferences, the national level or in the preparatory committee of the conference) any women with initiative and knowledge of the UN procedures who would make proposals for alterations or resolutions regarding issues important to women. There was no international network to systematically ensure that women's voice was heard.

The NFLS adopted in Nairobi in 1985 do, however, represent the view that there are no specific women's issues but that all issues in the world are also women's issues. Women have the right to equally participate in the handling of and decision-making upon all human affairs. A general understanding is gradually emerging that women are entitled to voice their views and make their impact on all human issues wherever the formation of our life and future are at stake. Women wish to influence the handling of all issues – not just women's issues - within the UN System and at its world conferences too.

### - *Women for a Healthy Planet*

In autumn 1989 it was decided that the UN would hold an "Earth Summit", the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992 – twenty years after the first UN Conference on Human Environment took place in Stockholm in 1972. The report *Our Common Future* compiled by the Independent Commission on Environment and Development chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Prime Minister of Norway, was used as a basis for the Conference. Environmental issues had been on the UN agenda since the Stockholm Conference, but women had hardly been taken into account in connection with these issues, and their participation in the debate on the use of natural resources and environmental protection had been rare.

In developing countries environmental problems have for quite some time been very concrete everyday issues for women. In the USA women regard pollution and environmental degradation as the reason behind many problems including women's health problems, especially the increase in breast cancer. Therefore, ecological issues are strongly present in their feminist movement and women's studies. In Europe and in the Nordic countries there has not emerged any significant women's environmental movement, and ecofeminist environmental thinking is rare.

The Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), established in the USA in 1990 with Bella Abzug as the leading figure, focused on environmental issues right from

the beginning.<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of the 1990s WEDO called women from all over the world to come and follow the preparations of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). From the start of UN preparation, the WEDO international task force was present in every single UNCED Preparatory Committee session.

In November 1991, approximately six months before the Rio Conference, WEDO organized the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet in Miami. Attended by 1,500 women from 83 countries, this was the largest unofficial meeting held prior to the Rio Conference. The Women's Congress adopted the *Women's Action Agenda 21* (directly related to the main document prepared for the UN Conference, entitled Agenda 21, i.e., Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century) which formed the basis for women's efforts to influence the documents of the official UNCED in Rio.

The *Women's Action Agenda 21* declared in its Preamble clear points of departure for women's actions on environment:

“As caring women, we speak on behalf of those who could not be with us, the millions of women who experience daily the violence of environmental degradation, poverty, and exploitation of their work and bodies. As long as Nature and women are abused by so-called ‘free market’ ideology and wrong concepts of ‘economic growth’ there can be no environmental security.”

“We equate lack of political and individual will among world leaders with a lack of basic morality and spiritual values and an absence of responsibility towards future generations.”

“We will no longer tolerate the enormous role played by the military establishment and industries in making the 20<sup>th</sup> century the bloodiest and most violent in all of human history. Militarism is impoverishing and maiming both the Earth and humanity.” (WEDO 1992)

- *An Infallible Strategy*

Drawing from her experience as a US Congresswoman and a skilled lawyer, Bella Abzug developed in WEDO the Women's Caucus which was first tried and tested in connection with UNCED, during its preparation process and then during the Conference itself. In fact, Women's Caucus is a well-organized women's lobbying network comprising women from dozens of UN member states from all around the world. It proved an unprecedented success at UNCED and has later been instrumental in ensuring that women's voices have been heard in

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<sup>10</sup> WEDO began in 1990 as an International Policy Action Committee of 54 women, with almost one half of the members from developing countries, nine from Europe and the rest from Canada, Japan, New Zealand and United States. Along with Bella Abzug, among the initiators were other women who had already been involved in the organizing of the NGO Forums in Mexico and Nairobi, such as Rosalind Wright Harris, Dorothy Slater Brown, Margaret Snyder, Virginia Hazzard, Catherine Tinker and several others. The Women's Caucus network created by WEDO has mobilized thousands of activities all over the world.

all of the UN world conferences held in the 1990s and that issues in women's interests have been systematically and effectively promoted.<sup>11</sup>

The effective methodology of the Women's Caucus includes the following methods and ways of action:

- the women's network operations start simultaneously with the UN preparations for the conference in question;
- the women's network and its affiliated organizations get accredited as observers to the preparatory Committee and the actual UN conference in question;
- the officially accredited organizations have access to the draft documents and the preparatory process of final documents of the conference;
- the network participants organize themselves into groups according to their expertise, their chances to participate and, as appropriate, with respect to the structure of the document under preparation;
- each successive draft of the main document is carefully studied and supplied with detailed amendments and alterations, and this version is distributed to all the organizations participating in the campaign for comments and proposals and to the delegates and the Conference Secretariat for use as a basis for the lobbying negotiations;
- the official delegates and representatives of the Secretariat are contacted in all possible situations, and all appropriate channels are utilized to carry out negotiations and present arguments for the suggested amendments;
- the above applies to each new drafts of the final document throughout the conference preparation process and the actual conference.
- comprehensive knowledge of and expertise in the subjects concerned, diplomatic and respectful manners, credibility and patience make the recipe for successful lobbying.

At UNCED, for example, the processing of the texts was an enormous effort because the conference document swelled into a massive pile totalling almost 800 pages. As of the preparatory phase, the women divided the work by organizing groups that would each concentrate on a specific section, read the texts and provide suggestions for alterations which then would be jointly compiled and approved. As a rule, this process has to be repeated several times during conference preparations as the conference documents also undergo constant changes throughout the official process.

Another task as great as this is the process of negotiations through which the suggested amendments are 'lobbied in' since their inclusion is not guaranteed by the fact that they are

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<sup>11</sup> The core team of the Women's Caucus network created by WEDO often had to spend weeks at the conference site during the Preparatory Committee sessions and the actual conference. They must possess both language skills, expertise and lobbying skills and the ability to create relationships with the delegations of like-minded countries – including their own – and the UN Secretariat, together with the capacity to act as a part of an extensive network. The possibility of spending weeks at the conference site is also a question of both time and money. Many women have been able to do this with the backing of their organizations or at their own expense, but the expenses of women from developing countries in particular have been covered with funding and grants collected in cooperation from donor governments, foundations and institutions.

written down with expertise and in the UN language. The amendments must be pushed forward through negotiations with either official delegates or the representatives of the Secretariat because NGO representatives do not have the right to speak in the official subcommittees and working groups. The success of such a large-scale lobbying operation requires plenty of "like-minded" collaboration partners in both the delegations and the Conference Secretariat. Creating these collaborative relationships is crucial to the process and requires expertise and credibility.

The success of the lobbying is also vitally dependent on the willingness of the Secretary-General of each conference to cooperate with the women's unofficial networks. The Secretary-General of UNCED Maurice Strong (Canada), the Secretary-General of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and Director of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) Nafis Sadik (Pakistan), the Secretary-General of the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) Juan Somavia (Chile) and naturally the Secretary-General of the Beijing Conference Gertrude Mongella (Tanzania) were all very favourable to collaboration with the women's networks in all of these UN world conferences held in the 1990s. They, together with several delegations, expressed their satisfaction at the fact that women suggested significant improvements to the texts.

At the world conferences held during the UN Decade for Women the governments had already adopted the principle whereby all organs and bodies of the UN system have the duty to "*mainstream the gender perspective*", i.e., to take into account throughout the UN system the implications and impacts of their decisions and policies on women and men, respectively (Pietilä and Vickers 1996:107-116). The proposals expertly prepared by women's caucuses were extremely helpful to the application of this principle and therefore genuinely welcome.

As a result of the women's strategy, the UNCED *Agenda 21* underwent great changes during the preparatory process and during the Conference. The preliminary drafts of the document mentioned women in less than a handful of places – all in the 'poverty' section or in the context of women and children as 'vulnerable groups' or victims. In the final version of *Agenda 21* the issues and concerns of women were introduced in hundreds of places, most notably in paragraphs which deal with environmental policy, the use of natural resources, consumer policy and sustainable development.

At the end of the UNCED, Maurice Strong gave full credit to the women's lobby when he said, "I think we have moved the cause of women and the awareness of their importance a tremendous step forward, thanks to the women who have been with us all the way to Rio ... and they've got to continue after Rio."

The Chair of WEDO, Bella Abzug, revealed that the central rule which made women's action so effective was that "...support for continuing to be the best organized and most unified and effective group can come from being the best informed." She went on to say that "...the story of the global women's movement is, however, still a work in progress. Mothering earth will take many hands and minds" (WEDO unpublished manuscript, 1993).

- *Diving into the Mainstream of World Conferences*

With the development of the systematic and comprehensive strategy to influence intergovernmental conferences, the approach itself also became comprehensive. Even the very concept of equality received a new substance; mere statistical and technical equality on men's terms in a men's world is no longer the aim – women demand that their views and objectives be taken equally into account in the issues addressed by the conferences. Women have provided the conferences with totally new aspects which would never have been provided by men.

The UN has organized a series of large world conferences in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> All of the topics of these conferences were highly important for women. Consequently, in connection with the conferences, the joint advocacy of women's interests continued systematically from one year and conference to another; women literally dived into the mainstream of the intergovernmental process.

This was already clearly visible at the *World Conference on Human Rights* in Vienna in 1993. Because the preparations for a world conference normally take a couple of years, the preparatory campaign for the Conference on Human Rights was already underway alongside the preparation for UNCED. This campaign was led by another US-based organization, the Center for Women's Global Leadership headed by the dynamic Charlotte Bunch.

The campaign was launched with a world-wide petition demanding that the UN Conference take women into account in human rights issues in general and address violence against women in particular. The petition was circulated in late 1991 and signed by 250,000 people from 120 countries. The petition campaign worked in two ways: It alerted women all over the world to awareness of their own human rights and mobilized them to influence the UN Conference, together with disseminating information on the fact that there actually was a conference underway, something that almost got ignored by public attention.

The international Human Rights Tribune published a speech by Charlotte Bunch and gave credit to the women's campaign, describing it as a great success story for the entire Conference on Human Rights. The campaign was a vital contribution to the publicity received

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<sup>12</sup> **The main UN World Conferences held in the 1990s:**

- UNCED, UN Conference on Environment and Development June 1992	Rio, 3 – 14
- WCHR, World Conference on Human Rights 1993	Vienna, 14 – 25 June
- ICPD, International Conference on Population and Development 1994	Cairo, 5 – 13 Sept
- WSSD, World Summit for Social Development	Copenhagen, 6 – 12 March 1995
- FWCW, The Fourth World Conference on Women 1995	Beijing, 4 – 15 Sept
- HABITAT II, UN Conference on Human Settlements 1996	Istanbul, 4 – 15 June
- World Food Summit 1996	Rome, 13-17 November

by the Conference in general and forced the governments of the UN Member States to take women's human rights into account at the fourth and last meeting of the Preparatory Committee, if not earlier (Human Rights Tribune 1993).

Violence against women was brought up so visibly and audibly at the Vienna NGO Forum that it has thereafter not been possible to silence the issue in the public debates. A special chapter on women's human rights was included in the Programme of Action adopted by the Conference, and the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women later in the same year. The Conference also sped up the appointment by the UN Human Rights Commission in 1994 of a Special Rapporteur to investigate and report on violence against women and to provide the Commission with proposals regarding the issue.

The *International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)* held in Cairo in September 1994 evaluated the developments in population issues since the first Population Conference held in Bucharest in 1974 and dealt, amongst other things, once again with the issue of women's right to decide on the number and spacing of their children, an issue which had created controversy for years, despite the fact that it had already been accepted as a basic human right in several programmes and conventions.

Since the fundamental question is how many people can be supported sustainably and humanely on the Earth, environmental and population issues are inseparable. Women's opportunities to control the number of their children and to produce food for their families are the key questions in this context. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) was the body within the United Nations system responsible for the ICPD preparations, and its Director Nafis Sadik was appointed as the Secretary-General of the Conference. The operations of the Women's Caucus were once again co-ordinated by WEDO whose work continued directly from the point reached in Rio.

A major task in Cairo was to ensure that the decisions pushed through by women in Rio and Vienna were not watered down or withdrawn. This "advocacy" was so successful in Cairo that the Population Conference, too, has been reflected upon as another major step forward when it comes to women's and girls' right to control their own lives and their status in the family.

The Cairo document was the first one in which the governments recognize and acknowledge the fact that people have a gender right from birth and that boys and girls are treated differently from the very beginning of their lives. Therefore, there is need to place special emphasis on the girl child's right to be born, get enough care and food, have access to education, and not to be targets of sexual abuse and victims of exploitation in pornography or prostitution.

The document also calls for men's equal responsibility for family planning and duties such as participating in child-care and household duties. Men are also made responsible for the implementation of these practices since they still hold the overwhelming power in most societies and almost all walks of life.

It has been argued that the *Programme of Action* adopted by the ICPD speaks feminist language. No wonder the Holy See and a group of the most patriarchal governments felt they had the worse of it in the consensus in which the Programme was finally adopted. In her closing words Nafis Sadik was happy to state that "This Programme of Action has the potential to change the world. (...) this Programme of Action over the next twenty years will bring women at last into the mainstream of development." ([A/CONF.171/13/Add.1](#))

The *World Summit for Social Development* (WSSD) held in Copenhagen in March 1995 was a cry for social development and human values in the 1990s world of hard market forces where social structures are breaking down both in the industrialized and the developing countries. The WSSD brought up the issue of increasing poverty in the midst of plenty and wanted to make the heads of states commit themselves to a policy towards the eradication of poverty. It has also been known for ages that the majority of the poor in the world are women and the majority of women in this world are poor. The feminization of poverty is still continuing in poor and rich countries alike.

One of the initiators and the Secretary-General of the WSSD was Juan Somavia, whose career as a builder and advocate of social development dates back to President Allende's Chile and the progressive atmosphere of the UN in the 1970s. Afterwards he described "the Social Summit as a deep cry of alarm ... and a moral and ethical challenge to governments, business, media, trade unions, political parties, religious traditions, intellectuals, civil society in general, and all of us individually" to give social development "the highest priority both now and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Somavia 1995).

The Women's Caucus was on the move in Copenhagen, too. Once again, they ensured that the achievements of the three previous world conferences were not watered down or deleted. Mr Somavia himself was naturally very pleased with the contributions of women supporting the objectives of the Conference, and he collaborated constructively with them right from the beginning.

"The Copenhagen Summit was the international community's most forthright acknowledgement that the problems faced by women lie at the heart of the global agenda," the UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali agreed in his assessment of the WSSD after the Conference (United Nations 1995b: Blue Book, para. 236.)

During the Summit, on International Women's Day, 8 March, the women's task force launched a campaign titled *180 Days/180 Ways Women's Action Campaign '95* to mobilize women to distribute information on the outcomes of Vienna, Cairo and Copenhagen and to prepare for the Fourth World Conference on Women which was due to be take place in Beijing in six months. The campaign involved events all day long and in the evening thousands of women marched in a torch procession "on the way to Beijing" through Copenhagen from the city hall to Holmen, the site of Forum '95.

## **6. The Beijing Conference – A Grand Consolidation**

It has been seen above that the topics of all of the UN world conferences in the 1990s have been closely connected with each other and with women's lives. Nature and the environment, human rights, sexuality and family planning, social development and poverty as well as human settlements all form the contents of women's lives all over the world. These conferences have also given impetus to wide-scale mobilization and rising awareness of women in many ways worldwide, something of which only glimpses could be given in this paper.

Ever since December 1990 it had been known that the *Fourth World Conference on Women* (FWCW) would be held in 1995. This awareness served as a background force giving direction to the work of the preceding conferences and particularly women's activism in connection with them. It was known that in 1995 the entire process would be summed up and checked against women's hopes and aspirations. In December 1992 the UN General Assembly accepted China's invitation and confirmed that the Fourth World Conference on Women would be held in Beijing on 4–15 September 1995.

However, the gathering of the world's women in Beijing, the capital of China, proved a lot more complicated a project than had been anticipated. The problems were both political and practical: Political reasons were often presented as technical problems and practical organizational problems were turned into and interpreted as political problems.

As soon as the 1992 decision to organize the FWCW in Beijing had been made, a major debate arose over whether holding a world conference in Beijing would mean support for the Chinese Government which many regarded as totalitarian and violator of major human rights. The events of Tiananmen Square in 1989 were fresh in the memory. Women deliberated over the best way to support change in China and in the lives of Chinese women: Should we go there and participate in the conference, which would bring the diversity of women's thoughts and views to the doorsteps of the Chinese, or should we boycott the Chinese government by staying at home?

Registration for the Beijing NGO Forum had to be sent to both the NGO Forum Facilitating Committee in New York and the China Preparatory Committee in Beijing by April 1995. By early 1995 the New York office had received almost 40,000 registrations and the majority of those registered were organizing their trips through travel agencies, provided that they would be granted a visa by the Chinese government. Originally, a large sports stadium in central Beijing had been reserved for the NGO Forum, a site regarded as very appropriate by representatives of the UN and with the capacity to hold tens of thousands of people.

At the beginning of 1995, however, the Chinese government announced that the stadium would not be available "for technical reasons" and that the NGO Forum would be held in the small neighbouring town of Huairou, some sixty kilometres (about 40 miles) from the centre of Beijing. However, it appeared that there were insufficient meeting facilities let alone accommodation in Huairou, not to mention the fact that the transport connections were almost non-existent. The Chinese assured that all the necessary premises would be built and transport problems solved by autumn.



Delays in visas also posed problems. About ten weeks before the conference was due, the Chinese Preparatory Committee announced that the government had cancelled all the hotel reservations in Beijing and that those wishing to participate in the NGO Forum – and be granted a visa for China – should renew their reservations through the Beijing Preparatory Committee no later than 15 July. Apparently this cut the number of participants by almost ten thousand.

Similar problems had been experienced with the Kenyan government in 1985 as they realized that thousands of feminists from all over the world would be arriving at the Nairobi Forum '85. The Kenyan government tried to cancel the entire Forum and, having failed to do so, suggested that it be transferred to another country or postponed till another time. This also failed but, instead, Forum '85 was a great success for the world's women and it did not cause the fall of the Kenyan government either!

- *The Greatest Success of All Time!*

Despite all the problems, the Beijing Conference became a massive success both in terms of its size and its results. The official conference was participated in by the delegations of 189 governments, more than in any other UN conference before. All in all, the intergovernmental conference had some 17,000 participants, with 6,000 government delegates, more than 4,000 NGO representatives accredited to the conference, about 4,000 journalists and media representatives together with a great number of international officials from all of the organizations in the UN system.

The NGO Forum also broke all the records, despite the fact that it was held in Huairou, far away from Beijing, where meeting facilities were hopelessly small, hotels uncompleted and on top of it all, whose streets and alleys were turned into mud baths every other day by torrential rains. Some 30,000 participants arrived from all over the world and 5,000 from the host country China. The journalists, visiting official delegates, lecturers, performers, the Chinese police and security officers included, at least forty thousand people swarmed around in Huairou every day.

Notwithstanding the countless insufficiencies, those present at the NGO Forum regarded the event as something to remember always. The global diversity of women, hundreds of well-known women who could be seen and heard live – Hillary Clinton, Helvi Sipilä and Jane Fonda amongst the best known – and hundreds and thousands of interesting and colourful events, meetings, personal encounters, new friends, reunions with old friends and the atmosphere of mutual sisterhood was an unforgettable experience for the first-timers in particular but also for those who had been to the previous fora.

It was also easy to see in the Forum why it was so worthwhile to organize this UN conference and the related events in China. Firstly, this allowed for over 5,000 Chinese participants to attend, interact, discuss and hear what the women from other countries had to say. Had the

conference been held elsewhere, it is quite likely that, only a handful of carefully picked women would have been able to participate.

In addition, an enormous number of young Chinese women and men worked at the conference and therefore got a chance to observe, establish contacts and gather impressions – something for which their opportunities would otherwise have been nil. The coverage of the Conference by the Chinese media provided a constant flow of information to the Chinese society at large. Such large-scale exposure of the Chinese people to an international event was no doubt, a comparative advantage derived from holding the Conference in China.

The 4,000 NGO representatives accredited to the official conference had been provided with good working and meeting facilities in the immediate vicinity of the Beijing conference site. The facilities were used daily by 40 - 50 issue caucuses each observing and lobbying their own section of the basic documents. Many of them had already participated in every Preparatory Committee session, studied the successive drafts of the final document and worked on it in the different preparatory stages for two years.

On the official conference site the work of these issue caucuses was coordinated by the Linkage Caucus comprising of 1,300 women from 73 countries. At eight o'clock every morning there was the great "morning assembly", a meeting of the Linkage Caucus where the UN Secretariat gave an update on the progress of the conference proceedings and the representatives of different caucuses on the progress of the lobbying regarding each issue. The joy experienced by the caucuses as they managed to push an amendment through was shared by all in these meetings. The more difficult the issue the greater the joy of accomplishment!

Around 85 percent of even those recommendations that were not approved at the Preparatory Committee's meetings and were still in square brackets at the start of the Conference – including the concept 'gender' – were adopted for inclusion into the final document by the assembled government delegations (WEDO 1995).

- *PFA – an Agenda for Women's Empowerment*

The official document adopted by the Beijing Conference is called *the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action for Equality, Development and Peace*, commonly abbreviated as PFA. First and foremost the PFA provides an introduction to and assessment of the global situation from women's viewpoints. Then it specifies twelve critical areas of concern for which it sets strategic objectives and proposals for actions to be taken for the achievement of these objectives. These critical areas of concern are *poverty, education and training, health, violence against women, armed conflicts, economy, power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms, human rights, the media, the environment and the girl-child*.

The Beijing Mission Statement states that "The Platform for Action is an agenda for women's empowerment." Thus, the emphasis is no longer merely on achieving equality and eradicating discrimination but on the empowerment of women so that they become full and equal partners in all policies and decision-making processes in their communities. Equality with men in a

male-dominated culture and society alone is not enough. Women need to be empowered to bring their own views to policy-making and the development of society and to set their own priorities in accordance with their inherent values.

In the final analysis, the Beijing PFA is a grand consolidation of all the decisions that had already been made by the preceding World Conferences on Women and the World Conferences on environment, population, human rights and social development held during the 1990s. According to pre-Beijing projections, it would have been regarded as a good outcome if the gains made could be maintained and not watered down, given the alliance of conservative forces.

But the Beijing PFA proved to be much more than this. It compiles the previously adopted decisions into a coherent Platform for Action, supplements and specifies them and brings them forward. The PFA defines women's reproductive rights more specifically than the Cairo document. It calls for men's equal responsibility as sexual partners and partners sharing family responsibilities and demands that these objectives be taken into account in early childhood up in the home and at schools. One of the largest chapters of the PFA deals with violence against women. It is the first ever programme adopted by governments that addresses discrimination against and the exploitation, abuse and other problems of girl-children thoroughly and in great detail. It demands that these issues be taken into account and rectified everywhere.

On adopting the PFA the governments committed themselves to the effective mainstreaming of the gender dimension throughout all of their operations, policies, planning and decision-making. They assumed the obligation to look at the issues from both women's and men's perspective before making decisions. The concept of 'mainstreaming a gender perspective' appears through the entire PFA. The governments also adopted the obligation to carry out *gender impact assessment* which applies to every single government bill or political decision. The clause to this effect is specifically recorded in connection with every strategic objective in the PFA:

*"In addressing (the issue), Governments and other actors should promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programmes so that before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, respectively." (Platform for Action, 1996: paragraphs 79, 105, 123, 141, 164, 189, 202, 229, 252, 273)*

After the Beijing Conference the whole United Nations system has reconfirmed its commitments to implementing the Beijing PFA in all its policies and programmes. The most important documents in this context today are the Report of the Secretary-General (E/1997/66) and the Agreed conclusions 1997/2 by ECOSOC on *"Mainstreaming the gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system"* (A/52/3, pp.27-35) on 18 July 1997. These Conclusions define the concept of gender mainstreaming and give instructions to the entire system with its multitude of institutions on mainstreaming the gender perspective into all policies and programmes. It also provides particularly for gender mainstreaming in the integrated follow up to global UN conferences.

Within the UN system - as we have indicated earlier - there are today several bodies and institutions in charge of gender-related activities and functions of the UN, the most important being INSTRAW as an autonomous agency, UNIFEM in autonomous association with UNDP, and the Division for the Advancement of Women within UN Secretariat.

Recently there has also been established a new, very important organ, the *Inter-Agency Committee on Women and Gender Equality* for enhancing the cooperation and coordination of the UN system in the implementation of the Beijing PFA and gender-related recommendations emanating from other recent UN conferences. Furthermore, all these institutions and bodies assist and facilitate the work of CSW which is the political organ in charge of gender mainstreaming and all other gender-related issues in the UN.

Outside the UN, i.e., in the UN Member States all around the world, there are the women and men as citizens and activists on whose awareness, initiative and activism depends how well their governments do remember their promises made in adopting the programmes and resolutions within the UN. Today there are also such influential global civic networks as *Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)*, *International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAW)*, *the Center for Women's Global Leadership*, and *WEDO* - to mention just the most powerful and renowned ones - which coordinate and facilitate the activities of the hundreds and thousands of NGOs and citizen's groups which are keeping their eyes on the intergovernmental bodies to make them accountable for their work.

- *Reorganization and Reorientation of Women's World*

During the process of developing increasingly systematic and comprehensive strategies for lobbying and influencing the intergovernmental conferences at the macro-level, the approaches of women's international networks and activism have also become more holistic and the perspective of women's international activism is changing. Equality is changing from being an objective to becoming a base requirement which is crucial for equal participation of women in setting targets and priorities and making decisions. However, the mainstreaming must not result in "malestreaming", women's integration into the men's world. In order to act as an engine for change, women must speak in their own voice, on the basis of their own experiences and values and eventually transform patriarchal structures.

The recent years have also experienced the creation of plenty of new international women's organizations and networks which promote women's international cooperation and participation in politics for the particular purpose of gathering women, including women in governments and official systems, to influence government actions within the UN system and international cooperation. Here we will look closer at four of them, which' activities are directly related with the UN process for advancement of women and the World Conferences in recent years.

*Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)*, a network established by a group of women researchers from developing countries before the Nairobi Conference in

1984, has acted as a herald of the new direction. Their first analyses on the past and presents development from women's perspective, *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*, became an immediate classic of development analysis when it was released in Nairobi in 1985 (Sen and Crown 1985). The first edition was published in Norway and never reached the market as every copy of it was distributed free of charge in Nairobi. Ever since, DAWN has served as a network of women researchers from the developing countries with thousands of allies and supporters around the world.

DAWN disassociated itself from the whole western development thinking from the beginning. Their point of departure is feminism as a political movement which "has at its very core a process of economic and social development geared to human needs through wider access to economic and political power. Equality, peace and development, by and for the poor and oppressed, are inextricably interlinked with equality, peace and development by and for women." ([DAWN Report, 1985, 14](#))

Another important network is the *International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAP)*, which was established in 1986 after the third world conference on women in Nairobi. It monitors the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which was adopted by the UN in 1979. Countries that ratify the Convention undertake the legal obligation to take all appropriate measures to improve the status of women and change the customs and laws that impede women's advancement.

Today IWRAP is a global network of activists, scholars and organizations that focus on the advancement of women's human rights. It publishes a quarterly newsletter, *Women's Watch*, which is distributed to over 5,000 subscribers all over the world and has become an indispensable tool for all who want to follow and participate in the international women's watch over the implementation of the Convention. The site of IWRAP is the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.

Over the years IWRAP has created very constructive working relationships and mutual understanding with CEDAW, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, to which the States Parties are obliged to report every fourth year on their activities and achievements in implementing the Convention. From its early years IWRAP has organized seminars for women from Member States to be trained to follow up the juridical process connected with the implementation of and monitoring the Convention.

The cooperation between CEDAW and IWRAP has now been developed into regular five-day pre-sessional working group meetings before every session of CEDAW where the official members of CEDAW and NGO-representatives meet. In this working group the NGO-representatives, particularly from the States Parties whose turn to report to the Committee is at hand, can respond to their respective governments' reports. This practice will become even more effective in the future when the pre-sessional working group meetings will be organized several months in advance prior each CEDAW Committee session with a view to ensuring that the NGOs can submit information in time to be used by the Committee in preparation of questions for the forthcoming respective country reviews.

Nowadays it is also becoming a frequent practice that the national women's organizations submit their "shadow reports" to the CEDAW Committee - either directly or through IWRAW - when the time is due for their respective governments to present their official periodic reports. As more NGOs are getting involved in the reporting process and in interaction with the Committee, the NGO community has gained more expertise in preparing information for presentation. They provide reports that thoroughly analyse the government's Convention implementation efforts and point out the gaps and misstatements in the government reports. Due to training and assistance given by IWRAW to women's organizations, this has become a powerful tool in the hands of women for advancement of women's rights in their countries (IWRAW 1998).

In connection with the preparations of the World Conference on Human Rights we saw already, what a decisive role *the Center for Women's Global Leadership* had in the mobilization and giving publicity to the Conference. This *Global Center* has since 1990 fostered women's leadership in the area of human rights through women's global leadership institutes, strategic planning activities, international mobilization campaigns, global education endeavours, publications, and resource center. Center works from a human rights perspective with an emphasis on violence against women, sexual and reproductive health and socio-economic well-being.

The Global Center monitors especially the work of the UN Commission on Human rights and facilitates the activities of the Women's Human Rights Caucus during the sessions of both the CHR and CSW. Since 1993 the Center has organized annually the Women's Global Leadership Institute, a two week intensive course for about 25 women at a time seeking to strengthen women's leadership in movements around the world that are working for human rights from the perspective of women's lives. In connection with the CHR session the Center has last two years conducted also a Women's Human Rights Advocacy Training.

Together with UNIFEM, UNICEF and hundreds of international and national human rights organizations and groups the Global Center organizes every year a global *16 Days of Activism Campaign* from November 25 to December 10, the Human Rights day. In 1998 the campaign was dedicated to the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights with a special theme "*Imagine a world where all women enjoy their human rights*". This campaign seem to have reached really global dimensions indicated, for instance, by the list of events in last year from Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Bolivia, Peru, India, Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Trinidad and Tobago, Croatia, United States, England, Israel, Japan etc. The same period has already been observed also by many other organizations and movements like UNIFEM national groups, the new men's movement, White Ribbon, etc. campaigning for elimination of violence against women as the goal.

When it comes to influencing intergovernmental decisions and the UN system in particular, the *Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)* stands out as the most significant network and coordinator in the 1990s. WEDO defines itself as "... an international advocacy network actively working to transform society to achieve a healthy and peaceful planet, with social, political, economic and environmental justice for all through the

empowerment of women in all their diversity and their equal participation with men in decision-making from grassroots to global arenas" (WEDO 1998b).

As mentioned earlier, WEDO brings together and coordinates the activities of a great number of organizations from all over the world. The First World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet arranged by WEDO in Miami in 1991 had women from 83 countries as participants. The Second Congress for a Healthy Planet in Beijing right before the UN Conference brought together more than a hundred new and old international – mainly women's – organizations. The majority of these organizations had been established during the past decade in developing countries or in the former socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s (WEDO 1996d).

The network coordinated by WEDO has carried out invaluable work in disseminating information on the UN conferences to women around the world and in mobilising them for global cooperation. The constant expansion and deepening of women's participation has been achieved through countless campaigns, small and large gatherings, festivals, fairs and tribunes, etc. The events have during these years been organized by partners of the network in their respective countries and internationally, across the borders.

NGO events directly linked to the preparations of the Beijing Conference included the Women's Global Strategies Meeting organized by WEDO in Glen Cove, USA, in 1994, which created the *180 Days/180 Ways Women's Action Campaign* to mobilize women in preparation for Beijing; the Second Nordic Forum organized by the Nordic Women's Organizations and Governments, with 16,000 participants in Turku, Finland, in 1994; all the women's trains on the way to Beijing; the Peace Train organized by WILPF from Helsinki, the UN/NGO Liaison Service train from Vienna, the Beijing Express organized by UNDP as a training train and possibly others, together with countless smaller events around the world.

The 180 Days/180 Ways Women's Action Campaign alone is known to have mobilized over 500 international and national organizations in 80 countries into activating women to call for their own empowerment and find out about the Beijing Conference and the reasons why it was worth attending.

The change in women's international orientation is manifested in the fact that even women in the North have started to become more critical and turn their eyes on their own governments' policies and economies in the North. North-South development assistance is no longer enough – nor has it ever been – solidarity and sisterhood is required above all. This calls for new orientation by women in the North; talk about agents for change must be turned into action, into political activity in the North. The new orientation should attempt to create changes in the policies and actions of rich countries vis-à-vis the rest of the world and global process. The North is the site of global economic power system and the companies of which this global structure consists.

Everything that takes place within the UN system is founded on cooperation between governments and their decisions. Consequently, the implementation of these decisions also depends on the governments, on the commitment of each one of them to realize in practical terms in their own countries the decisions made together within the UN system. This is both the strength and the weakness of the UN: The UN system has no authority to go and implement the decisions directly in any country, nor the power to force any government to comply with the decisions. The only exceptions are the decisions of the Security Council which, in accordance with the UN Charter, are obligatory to every Member State.

Ultimately, the practical implementation of UN decisions depends on the extent to which the citizens in each Member State are aware of the decisions adopted by their government on their behalf in the UN and on the extent to which the citizens can make their governments politically accountable for the implementation of these decisions. Therefore, it is crucially important that women are aware of the "promises" made by their governments in Rio, Vienna, Cairo, Copenhagen and Beijing when adopting the programmes at those world conferences. Likewise, Governments are also responsible and accountable to their citizens, male and female alike, for the implementation of the decisions they have adopted at international platforms.

The Beijing PFA reminds us of this by emphasizing government accountability to the world's women in several paragraphs. "The success of the Platform for Action will require a strong commitment on the part of Governments, international organizations and institutions at all levels. It will also require ... the establishment or strengthening of mechanisms at all levels for accountability to the world's women" (PFA, Chapter 1, Article 5). Women can make the governments face their responsibility and accountability only if they know what the PFA and other programmes entail and what the implications of the promises are.

After the Beijing Conference, WEDO undertook the task of ensuring that the governments do not forget the commitments they made in adopting the PFA unanimously. Since WEDO has contacts, both official and unofficial, in almost every UN Member State, it has been possible to gather information on the progress of the implementation of the PFA in each country. Information has also been requested through the respective missions to the UN. The information received from the official sources has been checked against that received from the NGOs.

WEDO compiled its first report on how governments were turning words into action as early as six months after Beijing, in time for the 1996 session of CSW (WEDO 1996a). The report, published in September 1997, included as many as 112 countries announcing that they had drawn up a national action plan and another 21 had a draft plan. Information was received from 163 countries, which speaks for WEDO's efficiency (WEDO 1997). Interestingly, WEDO has usually received information from more countries than the UN itself, although the UN also obliges the member governments to provide reports.

In the three years since Beijing, WEDO has published follow up reports every six months. This kind of a follow-up process on the UN decisions is unprecedented in its stringency. This is the way the world's women are holding the governments accountable for their promises (WEDO 1998a). Although the decisions made by a world conference are not legally binding



to the governments, they can be regarded as politically binding when the document is adopted unanimously without a vote, as was the case with the PFA.

In Bella Abzug's words: "We did not get everything that we want... But it is the strongest statement of consensus on women's equality, empowerment and justice ever produced by the world's governments. It's a vision of a transformational picture of what the world can be for women as well as men, for this and future generations" (WEDO 1995).

## **7. Epilogue – Will the World Change?**

The extent and significance of women's impact on UN operations in the 1990s has made it impossible to be ignored any more. Women act through official channels and lobbying alike, and they systematically observe the implementation of decisions. This constitutes determined civic activism across national borders and past national governments.

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, the roots of women's activism can be traced back to the days of the League of Nations when women's organizations already found it worthwhile to provide their support to intergovernmental cooperation for the prevention of wars and securing peace. With the founding of the UN, women had a crucial role in the formulation of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was the determination and vision of the early women activists that led to the establishment of CSW so early in the history of the UN. Although the new wave of women's activism did not appear until the early 1970s, it has grown rapidly ever since and reached the proportions witnessed in connection with the 1990s world conferences.

During the UN Decade for Women, women acquired knowledge of and experience in how they can – and cannot – have influence within the UN system. During the preceding decades the main objective had been equality between men and women and the advancement of the rights and status of women. The theme of the UN Decade for Women was "Equality, Development and Peace", which can be interpreted as meaning that equality is the prerequisite for women's equal participation in decision-making regarding development and peace. The objective adopted in the 1990s is that the gender perspective must be built - mainstreamed - into all planning and decision-making, to the effect that before decisions are taken or plans are implemented, an analysis is always made of the effects on women and men respectively.

Women's participation in international events and UN operations has continuously increased not only qualitatively but also quantitatively. The women involved in the League of Nations and the founding of the United Nations comprised a handful of strong, highly educated and self-assured individuals. As the number of women gathering together in connection with the UN world conferences has grown from about 6,000 in Mexico City in 1975 into the real *women's world conference* with almost 50,000 participants in Beijing in 1995, so has the increasing experience and involvement of a multitude of women been manifested ever more convincingly.

Improved economic conditions, communications and a higher level of education and knowledge have provided more and more women with the opportunity to take part in these events. However, this has also required strong motivation and faith in the importance of participation; this has sprouted from the individual experience of empowerment and growing strength through actions in common.

- *Momentum from the South*

For decades the majority of women participating in women's international gatherings were mainly from the western middle-class background, representing the white minority of the world. The emphasis of the activism and dynamics of the international women's movement has now shifted to the South. Ever since the Nairobi Conference, the proportion of women from developing countries has increased in all UN conferences and their parallel events. Their enthusiasm, motivation and preparedness for action are now providing new inspiration and faith for the women of the North too.

The women's world also manifests the richness of the cultures of humanity, the diversity of customs and traditions, contrary to the uniformity of the hegemonic business masculinity. In all cultures, women are the carriers and transmitters of the heritage, both for the better and the worse. Through cultures we can also find the elements of commonality and sisterhood, as there are common denominators in women's basic experiences around the world.

The realization that it is worth women's while to enter the international arena to jointly push forward the objectives that had not been met at the national level dates back to the days of the League of Nations. Since Nairobi in 1985, women's efficiently co-ordinated efforts have resulted in the adoption – even unanimously – by the intergovernmental conferences of global programmes whose objectives and obligations placed on governments go a lot further than the national government policies. Internationally adopted conventions and recommendations are excellent tools for pressuring governments into their implementation at the national level in every country.

The most far-reaching document is the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which was unanimously adopted by 189 governments in the capital of a conservative superpower. Covering all aspects of life, the PFA sets objectives whose implementation will require a great deal from each government. Its implementation and utilization will provide a lot of work for years, even in the most advanced countries. This miracle was created thanks to years of cooperation between women, almost 1,500 skilful lobbyists in the corridors of the conference site together with another 35,000 women (and men) keeping watch over the process at the NGO Forum in Huairou and all over Beijing.

But what will take place in practice in the UN Member States? Will the programmes written by women and adopted by the governments be implemented, will the culture change, will inequality, discrimination and violence against women soon be a thing of the past in every corner of the world?

- *Every Government is Accountable*

The weakest point of women's strategy, however, can be found at the national level in every country. Although tens of thousands of women from around the world pushed through the programmes aimed at the great change, they are still only a small fraction of all women. The potential power of these programmes and resolutions is still not known to the great majority of women. Therefore they are not empowered to use them as effective tools in each country for changing their lives and the lives of others.

An immense amount of work is required in every country in order to prevent the decisions adopted by the governments in the UN from being left to gather dust on the shelves. It is our task as those committed to gender equality to ensure that governments will not forget their commitments. We can question the governments' credibility unless they meet the objectives they have adopted. And when governments change, the new government should be made aware of the commitments made. International commitments remain valid in spite of governments coming and going.

There will not be another UN world conference for a long time. There is enough work with the implementation of the decisions made by the previous ones. The Programme of Action adopted by the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) reaches well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, whereas the Beijing Platform for Action formally applies only to the years 1996–2000.

The UN General Assembly will follow up the implementation by the Member States of the programmes adopted this decade every five years. The first high-level plenary review to appraise and assess the progress achieved in the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies and the Beijing Platform for Action and to consider further actions and initiatives will take place as a Special Session of the General Assembly, "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century", on 5-9 June 2000. Women's networks, WEDO and CSW monitor the implementation of the programmes adopted by the Beijing and other conferences annually.

The implementation of the programmes must, however, take place separately in each country, and this is something where every one of us can accept part of the responsibility to influence. The programmes must be translated into the language of each country to allow everybody a chance to study them. It is crucial that they are also 'operationalized', transformed into practical action in schools, organizations, political parties and all of the respective institutions. It is our responsibility to make the governments accountable for the implementation of their decisions. Without citizens' activism and contribution – and in this case without women's activism and contribution – UN decisions will not be implemented in practice, no matter how good they are.

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## **Annex I**

The first session of the United Nations General Assembly in London, 12 February 1946:

### ***AN OPEN LETTER TO THE WOMEN OF THE WORLD***

“An Open Letter to the women of the world from the women delegates and advisers at the first Assembly of the United Nations:

“This first Assembly of the United Nations marks the second attempt of the peoples of the world to live peacefully in a democratic world community. This new chance for peace was won through the joint efforts of men and women working for common ideals of human freedom at a time when the need for united effort broke down barriers of race, creed and sex.

“In view of the variety of tasks which women performed so notably and valiantly during the war, we are gratified that seventeen women representatives and advisers, representatives of eleven Member States, are taking part at the beginning of this new phase of international effort. We hope their participation in the work of the United Nations Organization may grow and increase insight and in skill. To this end we call on the Governments of the world to encourage women everywhere to take a more active part in national and international affairs, and on women who are conscious of their opportunities to come forward and share in the work of peace and reconstruction as they did in war and resistance.

“We recognise that women in various parts of the world are at different stages of participation in the life of their community, that some of them are prevented by law from assuming full rights of citizenship, and that they therefore may see their immediate problems somewhat differently.

“Finding ourselves in agreement on these points, we wish as a group to advise the women of all our countries of our strong belief that an important opportunity and responsibility confront the women of the United Nations: first, to recognise the progress women have made during the war and to participate actively in the effort to improve the standards of life in their own countries and in the pressing work of reconstruction, so that there will be qualified women ready to accept responsibility when new opportunities arise; second, to train their children, boys and girls alike, to understand world problems and the need for international cooperation, as well as the problems of their own countries; third, not to permit themselves to be misled by anti-democratic movements now or in the future; fourth, to recognise that the goal of full participation in the life and responsibilities of their countries and of the world community is a common objective toward which the women of the world should assist one another.”

#### **Signed by:**

*Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt, USA*

*Mrs Lefauchaux, France, Miss Minerva Bernardino, The Dominican Republic, Mrs Dalen, Norway, Mrs Verwey, The Netherlands,*

*Twelve other woman delegates to the General Assembly*

**Annex II**

**Year by Year Progress of the Convention on  
the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women**  
(Figure 3. from the Making Women Matter , page 127.)