



**The Long March to Beijing: the United Nations and the
Women's Revolution**
Vol. 1. The Vienna Period

by

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Outline

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The clock showed 4:45 a.m. when Patricia Licuanan, chairperson of the Main Committee of the Fourth World Conference on Women brought down her gavel and declared that the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action had been agreed. It was September 15, 1995 and, as the night had progressed, weary delegates had gradually left the hall in the newly-built annex to the Beijing Convention Centre where, for two weeks, the main negotiations in the largest United Nations conference in history had taken place.



The podium of the Main Committee, September 14, 1995

On the front dais, from right to left were Kate Starr Newell, a career international civil servant from the United States, the Secretary of the Main Committee; Patricia Licuanan, the academic vice-president of Ateneo de Manila University and a women's rights leader from the Philippines; Gertrude Mongella of Tanzania, a former parliamentarian, cabinet minister and ambassador, the Secretary-General of the Conference; and me, a political scientist from Minnesota. I was the only man in the front rank, as I had been for most of the eight years leading up to this moment. Looking now at the videotapes made by the United Nations Department of Public Information, I am impressed by how calm and business-like we all look. Over the six hours of that last meeting, the videotapes show continual movement of the UN staff sitting behind on the podium. As sections of text are agreed and new sections taken up, different staff members sit behind me. They come from every region of the world; they are almost all women. As a section is agreed, I visibly pass it back to a colleague so that it can be sent to New York by e-mail or fax for translation.

While the formal adoption would have to wait until the next day, the fall of the gavel in the early morning hours at Beijing is the last action of a process that began when the last gavel fell at the Plenary of the third United Nations women's conference at Nairobi, Kenya over a decade earlier on July 26, 1985. Over that ten year period, women and men, in governments and non-governmental organizations, in the conference halls of the United Nations and in rural villages, refined the ideas and priorities that were reflected in the document of 361 paragraphs that we had just agreed upon. That document included agreements by governments that had never been made before. It expressed ideas that ten years earlier could only have been dreamed by the most ardent feminists.

When, at the opening session of the Conference ten days earlier, Mrs. Mongella had announced that "the revolution has begun; there is no turning back", I thought to myself, "She hasn't got it right. The revolution has *already* taken place." Reflecting on myself, I realized that I had been part of it; one of the few men in the women's revolution.

It was not a revolution made by armies, nor by their generals. It was a revolution of ideas, which came up from the experience of every woman and many men, and which could be synthesized, expressed and agreed by representatives of all of the Governments on the planet. It was, if for that reason alone, a more durable revolution than most of those based on force. It was a revolution based on a new definition of legitimacy, of what would be behavior that was accepted internationally as a norm of civilized society.

It occurred to me that there was an analogy in those ten years of the revolution to the Long March that was a central revolutionary event in China. If the Platform for Action was a revolutionary document, Beijing was a fitting stopping point on the march.

But I was also aware that the march was longer than ten years. It had gone on for fifty, the whole history of the United Nations. It had its origins in earlier times. The march had not always gone in a straight line and, unlike the historical Chinese Long March, harassing attacks had not always beset it. It had not been immune to them either. But like that other event, the marchers always had a sense of where they were going. There was no question about the goal.

Revolutionaries on the march do not have time to write their memoirs; they are too busy with the struggles of today, and tomorrow, to worry about yesterday. There are not many books about the march to Beijing. Those that describe the march as outside observers and, while they may see the outcomes of events, they cannot tell much about the process leading to that outcome.

That is particularly true of United Nations itself. There were three types of participants in the march: Government delegates, representatives of non-governmental organizations and staff of the United Nations. With few exceptions, they have gone on to other things and their stories are at best anecdotes passed around the dinner table.

People who were not on the march, as a result, cannot learn about it. People who were on the march do not know the whole story. Eventually people may forget that there was a march, that there were origins to the ideas that made up the revolution and there may be tendencies to revise backward.

For the United Nations, under whose banner the march took place, these are trying times. It has been hard to explain to a public that has lost much of its faith in government that something as remote has value. There is a lack, perhaps, of “war stories”, recounting battles whose outcomes tell us something about the combatants, but more importantly show the link between those battles of the past and the everyday life of today.

As I began to move the things out of my last office in the United Nations Secretariat in 1996 after a career spanning some thirty years, the last ten of it with the women’s program, the volume of documents produced by the Division for the Advancement of Women during my time there stood out: two editions of *the World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*, two comprehensive reports on the review and appraisal of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies, a series of monographs on women in decision-making, over 30 substantive reports on women’s issues presented to the Commission on the Status of Women, the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly, innumerable papers for seminars and expert group meetings held over the period. Built into those words was a record of how ideas changed through the interaction of scholars, practitioners, diplomats and activists, mediated by the United Nations Secretariat.

There is a story to tell.

Perhaps I am but one of many who could tell the story and many would probably tell it differently. The women who were on the march, and who led it, knew what was at stake. It was their interest and their identity. No man can really understand women’s issues since no man has experienced them directly. Even the choice of a military metaphor for the title of the book and this preface is a masculine way of looking at the issue. Most women would not have chosen that metaphor. In a narrow sense, I was an outsider on the march, someone who was not really engaged in the struggle. My colleagues on the march were always polite to me and, in a very feminine way, they appreciated allies and they tolerate my choice of titles for the book. But others saw a man on the march as someone out of place.

In a larger sense, advancement of women is a man’s issue. As men, our lives are as much shaped by the circumstances of our mothers, sisters and daughters as by our fathers, brothers and sons. A world of equality between women and men is simply a better world and achieving it will diminish no one and allow everyone to grow.

As I began to write down the story from my notes and memory, I realized that it would take much longer than I originally thought. During my first year away from the Secretariat, I worked on the historical period and on the first seven years after the Nairobi Conference. Then progress stopped. Other activities intervened, for sure. But the main factor was that as I began to think about how I would describe the events during the last two years leading up to Beijing, I realized that I was still too close to the events to put them into perspective.

Several years passed before I returned to the manuscript. The Special Session of the General Assembly on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (Beijing Plus Five) took place and re-affirmed (and defended) what had been agreed at Beijing. As I looked back, I realized that the period from 1979 to 1993, when the Division for the Advancement of Women was located in Vienna, Austria, had been seminal for the development of most of the ideas that were eventually incorporated into the Platform.

There is almost no one left in the United Nations who remembers that period. One by one, we have retired. Chafika Meslem, the last Director of the Division in Vienna, and the person to whom I dedicate this volume, passed away in the summer of 2000.

This book is about the long march through its Vienna period and the revolution of which it was a major part during that time. Mostly it is about the ideas of the revolution and how they emerged, were packaged and adopted by all. It is mostly drawn from the sequence of documents. Where I was present, it reflects what I saw. Where I was not present, it reflects the documents themselves and occasionally what others told me they saw. From time to time, I have included some notes about myself, a form of post-it stickies on the story, by way of illustration and testimony.

Through this, I hope that those who have not been on the march will join it, those who are still on the march can renew their energy and for those who, like me, are now resting on the side of the road, we can relive those days and tell the stories to our successors.

At some point, if there is interest and when I have time to put logical order into the frenetic last two years of the march, the second volume, covering the New York period and the Conference itself can be prepared. In the meantime, this history of herstory will have to do.

Mt. Tremper, New York
May 2001

PART ONE. NAIROBI AND BEFORE

What is now needed is the political will to promote development in such a way that the strategy for the advancement of women seeks first and foremost to alter the current unequal conditions and structures that continue to define women as secondary persons and give women's issues a low priority. Development should now move to another plane in which women's pivotal role in society is recognized and given its true value. That will allow women to assume their legitimate and core positions in the strategies for effecting the changes necessary to promote and sustain development.

Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the
Advancement of Women, paragraph 21

The last stage of the long march to Beijing began in Nairobi, at the conclusion of the third world conference on women in July 1985. The Nairobi Conference, whose full title was the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace had been called to conclude the Decade. It would decide on next steps in the international movement for advancement of women.

It took place at the end of the Cold War, during a period when the North-South struggle over a New International Economic Order was just concluding and when the United Nations was going through one of its periodic financial crises. The Conference succeeded in adopting by consensus a final document, the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000.

Adopting the document by consensus was probably the greatest political triumph of the Conference, since during other United Nations conferences of the 1980's and at the two previous women's conferences starting in 1975 no final document had been agreed by all participants. But the document itself was flawed, at least to any external observer.

Alternately general and overly precise, the Strategies were a mix of muddled consensus language and the kind of bureaucratic "UN-ese" for which the Organization is notorious. A paragraph stating in high rhetoric that

Peace includes not only the absence of war, violence and hostilities at the national and international levels but also the enjoyment of economic and social justice, equality and the entire range of human rights and fundamental freedoms within society.

is followed by a paragraph noting that

In this respect special attention is drawn to the final document of the tenth special session of the General Assembly, the first special session devoted to disarmament encompassing all measures thought to be advisable in order to ensure that the goal of general and complete disarmament under effective international control is realized.

In a text totaling some 375 paragraphs, the Strategies touched on many of the central issues affecting women: employment, human rights, education. It skirted many others: violence against women, political participation, the media. And it was generally vague about who was responsible.

Looking at the text today, I am struck by its use of the passive voice. Exhortations are of the form "X should be done to enable women to do Y." There is an implicit idea that X should be done by the Government, since the Strategies were adopted by governments. Since most Governments were (and are) firmly run by men, the Strategies are, in one sense, a quaint Victorian plea for the men to do the right thing by their women.

The Strategies could be seen by those men as a kind of sop to women activists: “You see, we’ve given you your year and your decade, now let’s move on the important issues.” To women activists, the Strategies were just a starting point.

In another sense, however, the Nairobi Conference and its Strategies, was the culmination of a much longer process that started with the founding of the United Nations and continued for forty years. The analogy with the Israelites forty years in the desert as Moses led them to the promised land is appealing, but the difference was critical: there was no Moses, even though there was an image of the promised land.

To see the departure point for the long march to Beijing, it is best to start by looking at the first forty years.¹ Many of the issues that were resolved at Beijing first appeared at earlier stages, metamorphosed and reappeared. The institutions involved evolved, changed and remained the same.

¹ The official history of the United Nations women’s program was prepared for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations as part of a series of Blue Books containing an introduction outlining the history of the program and many of the main documents. I participated in the selection of the documents, in reviewing the contents of the introduction, which was reviewed by the Secretary-General himself. As official histories go, it is accurate. My own version, drawing on the same documents, is slightly less reverent and certainly not official.

Chapter One. Women and the United Nations: starting the march

The signing of the United Nations Charter in 1945 set a basis for the organization that has endured for fifty years. A response to the depredations of World War II, it was both a normative expression of what a peaceful world should look like and an organizational outline of institutions that were expected to achieve it. It was also the first internationally-agreed document that advocated equal rights for women, even though very few women were among its signers.

The Preamble to the Charter begins:

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED

to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and

to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small,

In its first article, entitled Purposes of the United Nations, the Charter states that its third purpose is:

To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion;

And in its Article 8, the Charter states clearly:

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.

No previous international agreement had expressed equality between the sexes. Not the Covenant of the League of Nations, not any of the precursor documents issued during World War II. The ambition of the signers of the Charter, of whom only four were women, could be seen in the fact that of the States signing in San Francisco only about half gave women the unrestricted right to vote and hold public office. Only a few found it necessary to include women on their delegations.



**Eleanor Roosevelt talking with Minerva Bernardino of the Dominican Republic
one of the few women delegates to the San Francisco Conference**

1. Mrs. Roosevelt's letter

The inclusion of equality language in the Charter was at least partly the result of strong lobbying by the few women present in the negotiations, almost none of whom were from the United States. It was also at least partly in recognition of the fact that during the war, women had broken stereotypes and moved into the types of jobs, in industry and in government, that had been previously denied to them. While World War II was, in its combat phase, a classic man's war, for the first time at the home front it was a woman's war.

This recognition, on the part of the male establishment, that they owed the women something was expressed in "An Open Letter to the women of the world from the women delegates and advisers at the first Assembly of the United Nations". The letter was read by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, the former First Lady of the United States.¹



First General Assembly, London, 1946

Photo: 24480 UN/DPI

In old newsreels, it is still possible to see Mrs. Roosevelt walk to the podium in the hall in London where the first Assembly was meeting. She addresses an audience in which there are a few women, but mostly men and mostly old and distinguished at that. Mrs. Roosevelt herself wears a hat and a dress appropriate to her age and station.

In her high, patrician American voice she begins by expressing a concept of solidarity between women and men in addressing international problems. She reads,

"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."

She continues, accepting in her text a subservient role for women, whose participation in the United Nations would be allowed rather than insisted upon – a position reflecting the extremely small participation of women in delegations (seventeen out of several hundreds). She says, "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

¹ The documents cited are part of the official record of the United Nations. They were assembled for *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women, 1945-1996*, The United Nations Blue Book Series, Vol. VI, 1996 (United Nations publication: sales no: E.96.I.9). For ease of reference I cite them as documents in the Blue Book. In this case, it is Document 2: "Open Letter to the women of the world", read by Eleanor Roosevelt, representative of the delegation of the United States of America, to the first session of the General Assembly, A/PV.29, 28 February 1946.

the beginning of this new phase of international effort. We hope their participation in the work of the United Nations Organization may grow and may increase in insight and in skill. "

She reads on, "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."

She continues by affirming a belief that women were not homogeneous and, in fact, did not have the same interests in all parts of the world, and that there were some parts where women's participation was underdeveloped. She states that "We recognize 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."

Finally, she reads that part of the letter that calls upon women to use the United Nations as an instrument to improve their situation, but in so doing it reflected on women's stereotyped roles as mothers and wives, with participation based on level of qualification rather than right:

"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 recognize 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 recognize 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."

The reading of the letter was followed by a general debate, a United Nations practice in which various statements are read into the record. Speakers from the Dominican Republic, Norway, the Netherlands, France, New Zealand, Uruguay and the United Kingdom. The first three were women delegates, a gentlemanly "ladies first" approach. All supported the ideas presented by Mrs. Roosevelt. If the debate is examined, it can be found to contain many of the contradictory themes that recur over the years: stereotyping of women as mothers, a gentlemanly avoidance of the issues, the premise that without women's participation the United Nations would not succeed. It also introduces many of the actors who would play a part: government delegations, intergovernmental bodies, the Secretariat of the United Nations and the non-governmental organizations.

At the end of the debate, the President of the General Assembly provided what might be termed a gentlemanly brush-off to what had been a very lady-like request for attention. Speaking in French, he states²: "The general discussion is closed. There is no formal proposal to submit to the vote, but I think I can safely tell Mrs. Roosevelt and those who supported her intervention, that the manner in which it was received by the General Assembly leads us to hope that it will be taken into very serious consideration."

In the general debate, the Norwegian representative, the Netherlands delegate and the representative of the United Kingdom presented themes that were to recur over the succeeding decades.

The Norwegian delegate, Mrs. Dalen, expressed the belief that, without the full participation of women, the United Nations could not succeed in achieving its objectives.

²*Ibid.*

““During the war, women in all countries participated and worked in the armed forces, in factories and in the resistance movement in a way never before thought of” she began. “During the war, women's experience, insight and strength were highly appreciated and welcomed. When the nation was in danger the women were called upon and they came, did their jobs, sacrificed and suffered.”

“Now, when the war is over and the United Nations are trying to build a new world, trying to lay the foundations of peace and freedom for humanity, “ she continued, “the world cannot afford to do so without using the rich resources that women's experience and capacity for work, women's insight and equipment mean for the various nations of the world.”

“All human beings have to cooperate in dignity and unity and fidelity. Then we shall succeed in building up a happy, peaceful and harmonious world.”

The Netherlands delegate, Mrs. Verveij, spoke what was clearly the fact. Most men did not see any importance to women's participation in the United Nations. She deflated the arguments against full participation based on biology, social norms and status and psychology in terms that could serve today. And she affirmed that conditions could quickly change. Mrs. Verveij was eloquent:

“... I should like to add that I have missed something, and that is an opposing voice to this motion,” she stated. “No one has so far said that he does not want the women of his country to speak and to act here. I am afraid that they have abstained, not because they agree with the purpose of this motion, but because they think that it does not concern them. They might be of the opinion that women in their countries are just faithful wives and mothers, that they do not want to be members of delegations, that they are not qualified for it and take no interest in it.”

“To them I want to say a few words,” she continued. “There is no one in this General Assembly who supposes that a recommendation like this would result in a future Assembly with as many women as there are men. There are very strong reasons why, in public life, women will always be in a minority. There are biological, sociological and psychological reasons; biological reasons because, after all, the first essential woman's right is the right to be a mother, and also the opportunity to enjoy that right to the full.”

“This means that we would never agree to a world in which social conditions resulted in a situation in which married women should be permanently obliged to work in the factories and on the farms and to neglect their families,” Mrs. Verveij emphasized, recalling women's traditional roles. “but this does not mean that we should for ever compel all women to confine themselves to the home.”

“There are women whom nature and man have denied the right to have children and some women think that they can do some good public work apart from their domestic life; it is very essential that they should have all the opportunities they want.”

Rising to the theme of social obstacles, Mrs. Verveij continued, “There may be social reasons against feminine participation as well. In most societies women seem to be marked out for special jobs, for the school and the office, rather than for the meeting-room. But we should not be too eager to draw our conclusions from facts like that.”

She also rejected this obstacle by stating, “A hundred years ago, before Miss Florence Nightingale started her campaign, there was no question of training women to be nurses. Ten years ago there were many doubts, even I think in this country, about women's services. Some views about jobs fit for women are inclined to be changed rather rapidly.”

“... in the third place,” she continued, “some people might quote psychological reasons. They might point out that this is still a man-built world and that women feel strangers as soon as they venture into it. This is true in a way.”

She made one of the first barbs in the United Nations records about the adequacy of male constructions of international order by stating “I must say that men have built this world quite impressively and that we feel duly impressed at first. After a certain time, however, some of us feel inclined to say: Is that all? All this pomp and all these intricate sentences can be translated into quite simple relations and words; and from that moment we feel quite capable of playing our part.”

“What I should like to emphasize is this: there may seem to be very strong reasons why no woman of your country can participate in international work. But are you sure? Is there no woman somewhere hidden away in a corner, no teacher, no woman professor, no woman doctor, no one who would be a credit to your delegation and who would be extremely glad to have this opportunity to meet men and women in an international sphere? It is on their behalf and on behalf of the women they represent that we make this recommendation.”

The delegate of the United Kingdom, Philip Noel-Baker, spoke last and made a proposal that women be recruited for the Secretariat of the United Nations and that links be made with the women’s movement.

He said: “... I have risen in order to draw the attention of the Secretary-General, very respectfully, to two practical points: first, that there ought to be representation of women in responsible posts in the Secretariat itself; and, secondly, that the services of the Information Section of the Secretariat ought to keep in close contact with the great women's organizations throughout the world. I think, in those ways, the views of Mrs. Roosevelt, and her colleagues, so eloquently expressed, could well be served.”

The New Zealand delegate, Mr. Fraser, referred to the possibility of a commission of the Economic and Social Council to deal with issues related to advancement of women, which he supported. He foreshadowed the role of that commission as an effective instrument when he said:

The Committee of the Economic and Social Council on the organization of the Council has instructed its Drafting Sub-Committee to submit a draft providing for the establishment by the Economic and Social Council of a Sub-Commission of the Commission on Human Rights to deal with the question of the status of women. This Drafting Sub-Committee is now preparing a draft on this subject, incorporating the recommendations made by the Committee of the Council.

It is proposed that the Sub-Commission on the status of women be established by the Council at its present session, and that it initially consist only of a nucleus of a few members. This initially constituted Sub-Commission would, among other things, be called upon to make recommendations to the Council concerning the definitive composition of the Sub-Commission and its terms of reference.

This shows that the Economic and Social Council is dealing with this problem in a very practical way, and in what I believe will be a very effective way. There are problems that cut across custom, problems that, in some instances, may even impinge upon religion. There are many difficult problems, and we do want patience and we do want tolerance. While never lowering our flag in regard to equality we still have to take into consideration the circumstances in the various countries and get the support and the sympathy of the various Governments and organizations, so that the women of the world will march forward to progress and a better society, hand in hand and side by side with the men and so that they will help to bring in, as the women delegates and Mr. Paul-Boncour [the French delegate] so elegantly stated, a world of peace and human brotherhood and a world of social justice and equality.

The first debate in the General Assembly introduced the main participant on the long march: at the governmental level, the Commission on the Status of Women; from civil society, the non-governmental organizations of the women’s; and the Secretariat of the United Nations. For the entire fifty years from

San Francisco to Beijing, the partnership between these three actors has been the mechanism for using the United Nations as an instrument for advancement of women.

2. The Commission on the Status of Women

The United Nations was established with ideals of universality and cooperation, but a structure built on a model of *realpolitik*. It was to be an organization of sovereign nation-states whose business would be done in assemblies, councils, commissions and committees where States could negotiate and agree. The bulk of the Charter presents the details about how this structure would work. Essentially, the great political issues involving war and peace would be dealt with by the Security Council and the General Assembly. Issues of an economic and social character would be dealt with in a co-equal, but somehow subordinate, Economic and Social Council, which would have its own intergovernmental substructure.

The initial response to women's pressure for their issues was to suggest that there be a sub-commission to the Commission on Human Rights to deal with them. Advancement of women was seen, from the first, as a human rights question. The first skirmish on the road to Beijing was about the relationship of women's human rights to the larger human rights regime.

To form the subsidiaries of the Economic and Social Council, what were termed "nuclear commissions" were formed to work out the terms of reference. In its fifth resolution on February 15, 1946, the Council established the Commission on Human Rights and the Submission on the Status of Women. The nuclear Commission on Human Rights consisted of nine members, only one of which, Mrs. Roosevelt, was female. The nuclear sub-commission also consisted of nine members, all of whom were female. No United States national was a member of the sub-commission.

The women's movement in the United States did not have a particularly strong interest in the United Nations, a situation that characterized much of the first fifty years. Of course, the first meeting of the General Assembly was in London, but even after the venue was changed to Lake Success and then to Manhattan, American feminists tended to ignore the U.N.

Part of the reason was that there was a contradictory tendency within the United States both to believe that there was no need for a separate women's issue and that women deserved special attention and protection. On the one hand, it was believed that, having achieved the vote in 1921, women's rights were adequately protected. On the other hand, the struggles against exploitative labor practices had led to the creation, in 1921 also, of the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor whose main function was to ensure protection (and hence unequal treatment) of women workers. It has been reported that Frances Perkins, the first woman to be named to a cabinet position (as Secretary of Labor) was not an advocate of equality, since that would undercut protective legislation.

These two tendencies were both expressed by Mrs. Roosevelt, who believed that women's rights could be adequately dealt with by the Commission on Human Rights and that having a separate body would tend to marginalize women. She also believed passionately in protecting women against exploitation. As chair of the nuclear Commission on Human Rights she was less than enthusiastic about a proposal that the sub-commission on status of women should be raised to a full commission.³

The nuclear sub-commission on the status of women had met in April 1946. Its members included several who had fought for inclusion of gender equality in the Charter, including particularly Minerva

³ The United Nations Charter established four inter-governmental bodies: the Security Council; the Trusteeship Council to look after non-self-governing territories which had become the responsibility of the organization; the Economic and Social Council; and the General Assembly as the highest body. It was anticipated that the Economic and Social Council would be assisted in its work by a number of specialized commissions, made up of experts from governments. Only one, the Commission on Human Rights, was explicitly mentioned in the Charter. It was up to the Council itself to determine the other ones.

Bernardino of the Dominican Republic, who had also spoken on the issue at the General Assembly. Ms. Bernardino, one of the youngest delegates at San Francisco and the first woman to be named representative to the United Nations, had been involved with the Inter American Committee on Women of the Organization of American States, whose purpose was to advocate for women's rights.

It also included a number of European women that might be considered feminists, even today. One of them, Mrs. Bodil Begtrup of Denmark, a member of the Danish resistance during World War II, was named chair of the nuclear sub-commission and delivered its report to the Economic and Social Council. In addition to reporting on its recommendations about its terms of reference and the main components of a United Nations women's program, Mrs. Begtrup communicated the view that status of women should be made independent of the Commission on Human Rights.

Speaking in front of the assembled Council meeting in its second session at its temporary quarters, Mrs. Begtrup began in her Danish-accented English⁴: "We understand well why the Economic and Social Council placed this question of the status of women under the wing of the Commission of Human Rights. Plans for development towards full equality certainly is a work for essential human rights."

"But," she continued, "I am asked, by my Commission, to propose to the Economic and Social Council that this Sub-Commission should be made a full Commission."

She elaborated further, building an argument that would be used effectively over the next fifty years as an argument to explain why it was not desirable to try to build attention to women's concerns too rapidly into the mainstream. She said, "in view of the importance of this world-wide social scheme which covers, in fact, the condition of half the population of the world, the work ought to have the best possible working conditions and not be dependent upon another Commission, and that it would give this work more weight in the social field if it was done by a full Commission."

She laid the cards firmly on the table, as she pointed out, "It has been said also, in these days, that women's problems should not be separate from those of men. But however idealistic, this point of view is purely unrealistic and academic. The practice shows that the Economic and Social Council has special problems that are connected with the status of women."

"These problems have now for the first time in history to be studied internationally as such and to be given the social importance they ought to have," she continued. "And it would be, in the opinion of this Sub-Commission of experts in this field, a tragedy to spoil this unique opportunity by confusing the wish and the facts."

Mrs. Begtrup articulated a hope that by a combination of legal efforts, use of public policy and by mobilization, the inequalities between men and women could be reduced. She stated, "Some situations can be changed by laws, education, and public opinion, and the time seems to have come for happy changes in conditions of women all over the world."

She restated a belief that the war had broken down many of the barriers to equality. "The attitude of men toward women has changed tremendously during the war in the countries having taken part in the war, because of the comradeship in the resistance movement and in the war activities." She continued: "in having signed the Charter all the Governments of the United Nations have pledged themselves, have shown an interest in working for equality between men and women."

She then presented the view originally set out in the letter read by Mrs. Roosevelt that the United Nations should be a vehicle for mobilizing women: "this interest shown by the United Nations in the conditions of women has aroused hope and interest among women all over the world in this new world. The feeling that this big body, this United Nations, with all the social and political difficulties before it, still

⁴ Document 5: Statement made by the Chair of the Subcommittee on the Status of Women, Bodil Begtrup, to ECOSOC, recommending that the status of the Subcommittee be raised to full Commission (extract), E/PV.4, 28 May 1946.

has time to take an interest in the daily life and in raising the status of women has aroused an enormous interest, and I can assure you that the women all over the world will give all their heart, mind and will to serve in the work of peace entrusted to the United Nations.”

Mrs. Begtrup set out the issues that the Commission should address, a set of concerns that eventually found reflection in the Beijing Platform for Action:

“The work [of the nuclear sub-commission] has shown us that the purpose of the Commission was to make proposals about how to raise the status of women to equality with men in all fields of human enterprise. They felt that it was necessary, as a background for their practical suggestion, about how to achieve this aim, to make a broad outline of the main fields in which progress was needed. These were (a) political, which is desirable to have; equal participation in governments and possibility to express all the rights and assume all the duties of citizens, (b) civil rights; marriage, guardianship, nationality and property—equal rights to hold and acquire, administer and inherit property. (c) social and economic: full possibility of taking equal part in social life, which implies full opportunity of fulfilling our duties towards society. (d) education: equal participation in education and means for education for men and women. “

She reported that the nuclear sub-commission had made a number of recommendations for actions to be taken to address these issues. These included that:

- world opinion be stimulated in favor of raising the status of women as an instrument to further human rights and peace and the United Nations Information Service should give special consideration through the means of press, radio, free lectures and so on;
- a United Nations Office of Women's Affairs in the framework of the Secretariat, run by a highly competent woman be established to be the planning center for the work and clearing house for information about the status of women and women's activities. It would give the women all over the world a feeling of satisfaction to have a special office at the Headquarters of the United Nations;
- the United Nations should make a world-wide, up-to-date, reliable and valid survey of laws pertaining to the status of women, their application and the actual status of women, completed in the different countries themselves, in collaboration with governments, specialized agencies, women's organizations, trade unions, academic institutes and others, following plans laid by the Secretariat by experts in research planning;
- when this knowledge is acquired, to call a United Nations Conference on the Status of Women, where government delegates and representatives of women's organizations could discuss the problems and the further aims of the Sub-Commission;
- both men and women can be elected members of this Commission and that both men and women could work in the office in the Secretariat; and
- to work closely with the various specialized agencies, such as UNESCO, the ILO and others.

In the United Nations speeches are not usually followed by applause. Their effect is seen in whether they move the delegates to take action. Looking back, it is obvious that many of these proposals made by Mrs. Begtrup on behalf of her colleagues took decades to be implemented.

The Council, however, did decide to raise the status of the sub-commission to that of a full Commission on the Status of Women. There was no further public debate on the question, so the matter had to have been resolved in the informal consultations that take place whenever a UN inter-governmental body prepares the text of its decisions.

The reasons for the decision are not explicitly stated in the record. It is evident, however, that there was a sufficient concern among women delegates that they convinced their male colleagues on the Council that the politicization of the Commission on Human Rights that was evident from its very first session as well as its primarily male composition raised justifiable fears that women's rights would be lost in a turbulent mainstream. In making this judgment, the founders drew on the experience of the Inter-

American Commission on Women of the Organization of American States, which had been in existence since the 1920's, and on early work of the League of Nations on women's rights. It was probably also true that many of the men preferred to have women's issues dealt with elsewhere, primarily by women themselves, since these issues were not considered important.

3. United Nations office of women's affairs?

The idea that there should be a United Nations office of women's affairs reflected an understanding of the potential of the United Nations Secretariat that was far ahead of government thinking and, indeed, of the thinking of the civil servants who were establishing the Secretariat.

Within the dominant realist model being applied to international organizations, the role of the permanent civil service was essentially passive. Anything else might smack of world government, a concept rejected by all but the most idealistic. The function of the Secretariat was to be the humble servant of the governments, helping to organize meetings, preparing agendas, translating documents, interpreting the discussions and publishing the reports. In this function, the role of the civil servant was to be politically neutral. It was also a low-risk job.

It was presumed that the government delegates would provide the substance for discussion. Indeed, functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council were considered to be expert bodies, whose individual members were nominated by their governments and confirmed by the Council on the basis of their personal experience and expertise.

The idea that a secretariat unit might do the research necessary for the experts to discuss and reach conclusions implied more than a passive group of civil servants. It implied a function of public leadership that few of the men organizing the Secretariat would share. More radically, the idea that such a unit could be "the planning center for the work and clearing house for information about the status of women and women's activities" and that "it would give the women all over the world a feeling of satisfaction to have a special office at the Headquarters of the United Nations" implied a pro-active role that was far from the model being established elsewhere.

When the first meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women took place in early 1947, it was noted in the report that the representative of the Secretary-General was Miss Elsie Bowerman (UK), Acting Chief, Section on the Status of Women. The first budget of the organization made provision for a section on the status of women consisting of three professional and one general service staff member as part of the Division for Human Rights. One of the professional staff members was a man, Gunnar Bjune from Norway, recruited at the entry-level. Stability of organizational units was not a characteristic of the early days of the United Nations Secretariat and most of the original staff moved on, with the surprising exception of Gunnar Bjune, who was a constant factor in the staff through 1952.

By the next session of the Commission in 1948, the representative of the Secretary-General was Mr. John P. Humphrey (Canada), Director of the Division of Human Rights. Mr. Humphrey, who was Director of the Division of Human Rights for twenty-five years. The Section on the Status of Women was headed, again on an acting basis, by Miss Leonie Mitchell of the United Kingdom. Mr. Humphrey was never comfortable with the Section and was said to have held, throughout that period, that it was not necessary to have a separate women's secretariat and that human rights were gender-neutral. However, the political pressures to maintain a distinct and identifiable women's rights unit protected the Section over the next forty-five years. The resources given to the Section on the Status of Women were always meager. However, during 1948, the Section was given its first chief, Mrs. Amanda Labarca of Chile.

At the 1949 session of the Commission, the Secretary-General was represented by Mrs. Labarca. That 1949 session was characterized by a significant concern for the position of women in the United Nations Secretariat itself. It had before it a study showing that very few women were found in the middle- and upper-management ranks of the Secretariat.

In 1950, the Secretary-General was represented by Mrs. Alva Myrdal of Sweden who was a senior director in the Department of Social Affairs. She was the first woman appointed at the Director level in the Secretariat, as against 14 men. This was in a Secretariat where all of the nine assistant secretaries-general at the time were men, a situation that persisted until 1973. She was a distinguished economist who eventually won a Nobel peace prize for her work on disarmament. She had worked with her husband, Gunnar Myrdal on the definitive study of racism in America, *An American Dilemma*. She did not last very long in the United Nations Secretariat. Her appearance at the Commission, however, was clearly an attempt to show that there were women in the Secretariat leadership.



Alva Myrdal.

AP/Wide World Photos

Mrs. Labarca continued as Chief of the Status of Women Section. Like all of the other staff of the Section, she did not hold a permanent contract and left before the 1950 session of the Commission.

The Secretariat had prepared a number of studies, including one that documented the limited participation of women in the work of the United Nations itself. It showed that few women were part of government delegations. The report stated, “Five hundred and eighty-eight representatives, alternates and advisers from fifty-nine Member States attended the fourth regular session of the General Assembly. This number included four women representatives, ...; nine women alternate representatives, ... , eleven women advisers, experts and consultants...”⁵ This meant that only four percent of the delegates were women. The study, prepared by the women of the section supporting the Commission, also showed that some 22 percent of professional staff were women and that, in the Staff Rules of the Secretariat, women were treated differently than men. It also documented the number of Member States who did not grant women an equal right to vote and hold office. The report suggested to the Commission the possibility of drafting an international human rights convention on the political rights of women.

The Commission was not amused. It passed a resolution which noted that “women have been engaged mainly in subordinate positions in the Secretariat, and that very few women have been appointed as members of delegations”, and requesting the Secretary-General to examine the reasons why women have not yet been able to take up more important positions in the Secretariat, and report thereon; in this resolution, the Commission also invited the Secretary-General “to take the necessary steps to give promotion to qualified women staff members and to appoint more women to higher posts which they are competent to fill in order to secure equality between the sexes in the Secretariat and thereby assure more fully the participation of women in all capacities in United Nations organs”.

⁵ Document 16: Report of the CSW to ECOSOC on the Commission's third session regarding the participation of women in the work of the United Nations (extract), E/1316, Chapter IV, April 19, 1949.

By the next year, the Secretary-General had prepared a report suggesting improvements in the number of women in high positions was due to increase, had revised the staff rules to eliminate the discriminatory provisions and had named a chief for the Section on the Status of Women. This began a period of relative stability, lasting through 1977, when only three different women headed the Section.

The first chief with tenure was Mary Tenison-Woods of Australia, who held the office from 1951-1958. A distinguished Catholic lawyer, she headed a section with five professionals, all lawyers, including, at various points, one man. In 1953, there were five women among the 31 professionals of the Division on Human Rights, four in the Status of Women Section. Tenison-Woods was like many of the Australian and New Zealand women who have worked in the organization: blunt, dedicated, fearless and casual.

She was succeeded in 1958 by Mrs. Sophie Grinberg-Vinaver of France, who had been her deputy. Grinberg-Vinaver, was a lawyer who had published on international private law and had been in the French resistance whose her family owned businesses in New York. Fiery in temperament, she was considered a passionate, if unbureaucratic, advocate of women's rights. She quickly fell afoul of Mr. Humphrey, the Division Director, who had little use for women's issues or, for that matter, women professionals. A story told to me by Tamar Oppenheim of Canada, who was a staff member of the section at the time and who later climbed through the ranks of the Secretariat to become Assistant Secretary-General and head of the United Nations programme to address drug abuse described Ms. Grinberg-Vinaver's Waterloo.

Prevented by a decision of the Director to attend a meeting that Ms. Grinberg-Vinaver felt important, she stormed into Humphrey's office and demanded that he reverse his decision. "If you do not reverse your decision," she stormed, "I resign." "Resignation accepted," he replied.

The next Chief of the Status of Women Section was Mrs. Margaret Bruce, who led the section from 1963-1977. Molly Bruce was English. She had been in the British military during World War II and had been one of the first persons hired to join the new United Nations Secretariat. She had worked from the beginning in the nascent Division for Human Rights, most not in the section dealing with women. Widely considered an epitome of an international civil servant who, after her retirement in 1977 headed the Association of Former International Civil Servants and was a member of the board of directors of the United States United Nations Association, Molly Bruce gave the section a stability that allowed it to build a sound legal basis for reform.

4. Marching forward, but slowly, 1948-1968

It is possible to pass over the twenty years from 1948 to 1968. There was considerable work done and much progress, but the work of the United Nations was what a Latin American might term *un trabajo de hormigas*, a work of ants, slowly and imperceptibly moving earth and building. The onset of the Cold War, including the ouster of the first Secretary-General, Trygve Lie of Norway, from office, placed the United Nations on the sidelines of global politics and affected the activities of all programs. Civil servants became for cautious, the organization went through the first of its many financial crises, the mode of decision-making moved inevitably toward consensus rather than voting.

The Commission on the Status of Women, like many intergovernmental bodies of the time, believed in decision-making by vote. At its first session, a large number of issues went to the vote. The votes divided between Western members and the few developing country governments who were members on one side, and representatives of States from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It became evident early on that any agreement based on majority vote was fatally flawed, since the dissenters, under the principle of national sovereignty, had no obligation to implement decisions which they had not voted to adopt.

To the extent that positions were polarized, it was difficult to achieve consensus and the Secretariat role of providing information and suggesting texts that would bridge differences was difficult. Progress was accordingly slow.

A few highlights stand out.

Dag Hamarskjold speaks on women

In 1954, the Secretary-General, Dag Hamarskjold, addressed the Commission on the Status of Women. It was the first, and the last time, that a United Nations Secretary-General addressed the Commission. Hamarskjold was only in the second year of his term, and the previous autumn the first woman, Mrs. Pandit of India had been the first woman elected president of the General Assembly (there would only be one other in history, Mrs. Angie Brooks of Liberia in the 1960's).

The Secretary-General obviously felt a need to address the Commission, and began by congratulating the Commission on its work and stating that it could note with pride that as a result of its activities, the United Nations, under the authority of the General Assembly, had sponsored the opening of an international Convention on Political Rights of Women under which women would have the right to vote, to be elected, to hold all public offices and to discharge all public functions. Thirty-five countries had signed the Convention and three countries had deposited instruments of ratification, the first being the Dominican Republic.

Hamarskjold continued that he was particularly interested in the item relating to the participation of women in the work of the United Nations. Although the number of women in higher posts of the United Nations and the specialized agencies were few, that did not prove that women were subject to discrimination.

He went on to express what was a commonly held view of many men that would explain the absence of women in decision-making. He stated that women's emancipation was so recent that highly qualified women had not yet been trained in anything like the same numbers as men, who had long enjoyed all the advantages of specialized education and training.

He then suggested that women's absence was a matter of their own choice, instead of entering public life many women who were highly qualified chose other equally important roles in the community. As a result there were few women, compared with men, in high posts in the public life of all countries and the United Nations naturally reflected that situation. It was logical to think that as the proportion of trained women in national life increased, the change would be reflected in the staffs of the international organizations.

Taking into account that the Commission had begun to consider itself the watchdog of the Secretariat in its efforts to ensure promotion of women, he assured the Commission, however, that under his administration there would be no discrimination on the ground of sex; the best person available for a post would be given the post regardless of race, sex, color or creed.

However, he also suggested that in the interests of good and effective administration questions regarding personnel should be channeled through the appropriate body, the Fifth Committee, to which the Secretary-General must report on all personnel matters and from which, therefore, all requests for information on personnel administration should normally come.

The Fifth Committee, almost completely composed of male delegates, had much less interest in statistics on women in the Secretariat and did not request the information. Indeed, it was not until 1971 that statistics on the gender breakdown of UN professional staff were made available to intergovernmental bodies. Had they been made available, what was really happening might have been noticed.

In 1949, when the Status of Women Section began providing the Commission with figures, a total of 23.4 percent of the professional staff, including 43 percent of those at the entry-level, were women. This reflected a number of factors, including the fact that during World War II many highly qualified women had entered government service at middle levels as replacements for men. Vacating their positions when the men returned, as was the custom, many joined the United Nations where they could fill similar positions. It was also the fact that many women were attracted to United Nations service by the expressed ideals of non-discrimination.

By 1955, the year after Hamarskjold decided not to provide figures, only 16.8 percent of professionals in a growing Secretariat were women and the proportion at entry-levels had dropped to 30.1 percent. The 1949 figure was not exceeded until after 1980, after two world conferences on women and the imposition of affirmative action.⁶ In the end, Dag Hamarskjold like his next successors and most high level government officials found that “the best person available for a post” may have been of different races, colors or creeds, but they were almost inevitably men, especially at the higher ranks.

No big women’s human rights convention, but some little ones

The United Nations approach to human rights was supposed to have been solidified by the adoption, in 1948, of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The Commission on the Status of Women had helped in drafting it by suggesting the use of non-sexist language in some key parts and the Declaration contained a prohibition on discrimination based on sex.

The politics of the period, however, meant that translating the principles of the Universal Declaration into a binding multi-lateral treaty, called a convention, took much more time than might have been hoped. Just as the women who had advocated a Commission on the Status of Women separate from the Commission for Human Rights had suspected, the Human Rights Commission soon fell into the political struggles of the Cold War and progress in negotiation of human rights treaties became glacial.

There were specific issues for women that had to be addressed, starting with women’s political rights. It was on the basis of a Secretariat report, which also suggested that the most appropriate remedy was an international human rights convention. Such a convention was quickly negotiated and entered into force in 1952. It provided, in some detail, for absolute equality between women and men in political participation, including voting and holding public office.

Another issue affecting women after World War II was nationality. The waves of immigration, refugee flows, movement of people to find jobs in other countries and the movements of militaries had led to a large number of marriages between women and men of different nationalities. In the laws of many countries, women who married foreigners automatically lost their own nationalities. If they did not lose their own nationality, their children could only acquire the nationality of their father.

Many women did not wish to give up their nationality, since this deprived them not only of their cultural heritage and identity, but also the protection of their country’s laws.

The Commission, based on studies from the Secretariat, addressed the problem by drafting an international convention on the nationality of married women, which set international norms of equality. The Convention on the Nationality of Married Women was adopted by the General Assembly on January 29, 1957.

⁶ The statistics were prepared by the Division for the Advancement of Women for *The Worlds Women 1995: Trends and Statistics*. Since no official figures were available between 1951 and 1971, the figures were obtained by counting the women and men, by level, in the lists of staff that are published in restricted documents each year.

Another issue that emerged during the period was the fact that very young girls were being forced by their parents, in many countries, to marry. These practices had the effect of ensuring women's subordinate status and reflected that, in many cultures, women were considered less valuable than men. While not expressed at the time, since research had not been done on the issue, early marriage and childbearing was hazardous to women's health and was a major factor in maternal mortality. In most countries, laws set the age of consent lower for girls than for boys.

Taken together, the factors related to coerced marriage, young age and, in addition, the fact that many marriages were not recorded, combined to make women's advancement impossible in many countries. The Commission, after several years' discussion, decided to draft an international convention on the question. As a result of its work, the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages was adopted by the General Assembly on November 7, 1962.

The work on women's rights continued steadily. In 1963, the Council asked the Commission to begin work on a draft declaration on the elimination of discrimination against women. A declaration is the weakest form of human rights instrument. Unlike a convention, which is legally binding to any state that accedes to it, a declaration is an expression of principles with moral but not legal force. However, declarations are often a way to reach agreement on language that can later be used to draft instruments.

The idea of working on a draft declaration on discrimination arose from a concern that the smaller conventions did not cover the whole range of problems women faced and, also, a concern that the larger human rights instruments being fashioned out of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights might be long in coming.

In December 1966, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights were both adopted by the General Assembly. These gave legal force to the Universal Declaration and their common article 3 prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex.

In 1967, the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

My mother's experience

I was born in 1942 and what was happening in the first thirty years of the United Nations to women was not something I experienced directly. But my mother experienced all of it, to the extent that a woman in the Midwest of the United States was affected by the trends. Much of it she told me, much I learned after the fact.

When my mother was born in 1916, women did not have the right to vote. Few attended college. My mother, from a middle class family in a small town in southern Minnesota, attended the University of Minnesota, the first woman in the family to do so. She considered becoming a girl's physical education teacher but settled on becoming a social worker, two of the few careers open to women university graduates. She began her career as a child welfare worker in a small town. At one point she decided to move to Los Angeles, California as a way out of small town culture, but in the end she stayed in Minnesota where she married my father, a linotype operator. I was born shortly thereafter and my mother would have been expected to stop working, but the United States entered World War II, my father was drafted into the army and my mother had to balance work and family responsibilities by continuing to work.

When the war ended, my mother was expected to give up her job to a returning veteran, and become a housewife. She did so, bearing two more children. When my sister grew to school age, my mother, in the face of both economic necessity and the need for independence, returned to work. Having left the labor force for ten years, she was re-hired at the lowest rung of the professional ladder. She was one of the few women in the town to work, other than the women in family businesses or on farms who worked without remuneration, and other than poor women who always worked as housekeepers and

dependent carers. Later, it became necessary for most women to work, as America's economy went into prolonged recession.

At one point, the post of director of the county welfare department became open and she applied. The decision was up to the county board, composed entirely of men, as were all of the county officers. They selected a man with less experience or training. My mother was told that he needed the job and, in any case, her husband was working. When the man was eventually fired for incompetence, my mother ran the office for a time until the county board appointed another man.

When she turned fifty, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. When she died that year, it didn't occur to my brother, my sister and I that there had been something fundamentally wrong with the way my mother had had to live her life.

Technical assistance: an opening to development

The understanding that the situation of women was different in various parts of the world had been reflected in the "Letter to the Woman on the World." What to do about this had been less clear. In other parts of the United Nations, the problems of what were first termed "backward", later "underdeveloped" and finally "developing" countries began to be addressed by way of technical assistance programs.

The first United Nations technical assistance program was approved in 1947 as a section in the regular budget of the organization. The premise was that an infusion of know-how from the developed countries would enable developing countries to advance. The program gradually advanced, with the formation of a voluntarily-funded Expanded program of technical assistance. In addition UNICEF undertook activities to deal with the problems of women as mothers.

It was not until 1962, however, that a special effort was made to direct technical assistance to women. In a resolution passed that year, the Economic and Social Council recommended to Governments of States Members of the United Nations and members of the specialized agencies that they make full use, for the purpose of promoting and advancing the status of women in developing countries, of the technical assistance services available, by requesting the advisory services of experts, by promoting the attendance at seminars and other meetings, and by taking advantage of the availability of fellowships and scholarships. It invited the International Labour Organization, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund, in cooperation with the United Nations, to strengthen and to expand their programs designed to meet the needs of women in developing countries, and to seek new methods to achieve this purpose.

The Council requested the Secretary-General direct his attention, when planning the various United Nations programmes of assistance, to the needs of women in developing countries and to include in these programs projects especially directed to meet such needs. Although not stated in those terms, this was an early expression of a concept of mainstreaming, where gender concerns would be built into all development cooperation.

The Council also called for women-specific development assistance programs. The Secretary-General was asked to continue to utilize the available resources of the United Nations to advance the condition of women in the developing countries, by holding seminars dealing with the status of women, by providing experts on women's rights at the request of Governments and by offering human rights fellowships and scholarships to persons concerned with the status of women, and to make available to Governments, specialized agencies and non-governmental organizations in consultative status all information concerning the facilities available for the advancement of women.

In a sense, the Council was prompted by the Commission on the Status of Women to give a greater outreach responsibility to the Secretariat. It reflected a frustration with the process whereby most

work on advancement of women would take place in intergovernmental forums. It also accompanied an increasing concern of the United Nations with issues of development, reflected in the designation of the First United Nations Decade for Development.

For the women's program, its immediate precursor was a series of Secretariat studies followed by recommendations by the Commission in 1952 concerning the deprivation of the essential human rights of women in Trust and Non-Self-Governing Territories. The resolution adopted invited "all States, including States which have or assume responsibility for the administration of Non-Self-Governing Territories, to take immediately all necessary measures with a view to abolishing progressively in the countries and territories under their administration all customs which violate the physical integrity of women, and which thereby violate the dignity and worth of the human person as proclaimed in the Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." This was an early appearance of an issue that was to be resolved only after the Nairobi Conference, female circumcision or what was termed gently "traditional practices that are harmful to the health of women."

The Council, in mandating a program of technical assistance, also emphasized the role of the women's movement. It urged "women's non-governmental organizations in consultative status to cooperate with the Secretary-General, by stimulating public opinion with regard to the programmes of the United Nations which contribute to the advancement of women and by supplementing the efforts of the United Nations on the international and national levels through the holding of regional, national or local seminars, including if possible in the future an international seminar, the provision of fellowships, scholarships and expert advice, and other related activities."

Women and the Venezuelan Agrarian Reform

I became part of the mainstream United Nations technical assistance effort in 1966 when I was appointed to the position of expert in evaluation of social aspects of agrarian reform (community development). The post had been requested by the government of Venezuela, which was undertaking a massive empirical evaluation of the impact and workings of its agrarian reform, which was one of the most extensive efforts in Latin America. The lead organization for technical assistance was the Inter American Development Bank. I was the UN's input. My job was to design and analyze the social component of a major sample survey of beneficiaries of the agrarian reform, as well as to direct several case studies of agrarian reform settlements.

I was part of a team consisting of economists, agronomists, statisticians as well as a few sociologists, both national and international. There were no women professionals on the team.

Gender did not seem to be a factor in the agrarian reform. While the Venezuelan agrarian reform law did not exclude land ownership by women, its application tended to give land exclusively to men. On the government side, the agricultural extension agents were all men, since women were only trained in home economics extension. The leaders of the peasant unions, who represented peasant interests, were almost inevitably men.

In several of the case studies I noticed that in a context in which most government change agents were rather ineffective, the most effective government officials dealing with the reform were women: local primary school teachers, mostly of peasant origin, and promoters of the community development program. The community development program in Venezuela had been founded by a woman, Dr. Carola Ravel, and much of its staff was female. I did not report this in my findings, since my colleagues and I did not think that it was significant.

In the sample survey, which involved interviews with some 5,000 peasant households, we attempted to obtain very accurate information about the peasant household economy. We did so by asking peasants in interviews that lasted on average two and one-half hours to reconstruct, operation by operation, the entire previous agricultural years. "How many hectares did you sow?" the interviewer would ask.

“How many kilos of seed did you use?” “How much did the seed cost?” “How many days did you spend sowing the seed?” “How many days did your wife spend helping you?”

The method allowed the study, among other things, to estimate the value of labor input, both in terms of cash and kind. Although it did not occur to us that this was what we were doing, it allowed us to put a value on women’s and men’s unremunerated work. We did this by counting the number of days that a family member would contribute to various agricultural operations and then assigning it a monetary value based on the prevailing wage rate for hired agricultural labor in the zone. The crops produced for home consumption were given a value based on the cost of purchasing the same products in a local store.

When I reviewed the results, like a good sociologist, I ran sex against many of the indicators and discovered, as others had in micro-studies, that there was a sexual division of labor in agriculture: women were predominant in certain operations like weeding and harvesting, men in others. Women were predominant in raising food for home consumption. When a value was assigned to that labor and production for home consumption, it was evident that the economic contribution of the women in the household was generally larger than that of the men.

While the figures stood out, and I noted them mentally, when I completed my contract at the end of 1967, I did not include those findings in my report, nor did the report of the evaluation note them. The findings were not considered significant.

5. On to Mexico City, 1968-1975

Looking back, 1968 was a watershed year in many ways. It was the year of the “youthquake” where students and young workers toppled the government of France and protested the Vietnam War in Chicago. It was also the year that the United Nations women’s program changed direction.

The specific event that year was the largely forgotten International Conference on Human Rights organized in Teheran by the United Nations. The conference was called at least in part to break the political logjam that had afflicted the mainstream human rights regime. It also involved the Commission on the Status of Women and its secretariat, who were still considered part of human rights. It put on the table a number of issues that were to recur through the period to Beijing.

While women’s human rights could not be said to have been a major feature of the debates in the Teheran conference, one of the resolutions adopted by the conference directly addressed the approach to be taken. Resolution was entitled “measures to promote women’s rights in the modern world and endorsing the Secretary-General’s proposal for a unified long-term United Nations programme for the advancement of women”. The resolution reflected a shift that had occurred in considering how to deal with advancement of women.

While it maintained its human rights base, its focus was heavily on issues related to economic and social development, especially on education. It accepted a proposal by the Secretariat that, rather than dealing episodically with issues, there was a need for a long-term work program. The idea of a unified long-term program had been broached in 1962, in the context of development assistance. It was recognized that the various United Nations programs providing development assistance were not coordinating their efforts to advance women and it was felt that placing them within a programmatic context would obtain “more bang for a buck”. Longer-term approaches and coordination were two off-the-shelf answers to the question of how to deal with complex problems in a complex organizational environment.

The shift also reflected a resurgence of feminism, in both the North and the South. American feminism had been energized by the writings of such thinkers as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, which had touched a cord among younger women. In the developing countries, younger women who were emerging from post-colonial education system were beginning to question their situation. The two threads, western feminism and the perspectives of women from developing countries, were to come together with increasing frequency over the next quarter century.

Learning about the Feminine Mystique

In 1964 I was a graduate student in Boston. Like most of my colleagues, I was studying development. John Kennedy had called us to service and we were preparing ourselves. It being a faculty of political science, we were convinced of the utility of the State and of the political process to bring about change. While the majority of students were men, as were all of the professors, there was a high proportion of women among the students and staff. Many came from the elite women's colleges of the East.

I recall walking home from school that autumn with one of the support staff of the department, who had graduated from Wellesley College. She was reading a book entitled *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan. I was struck by her enthusiasm (and this may be why I remember the incident). She said that it gave her an entirely new perspective on herself. She offered to lend it to me.

I politely declined and our conversation moved on to other matters.

The long-term work program essentially consisted of a set of broad objectives, a number of tasks for the Commission and, by implication, directions for the work of the Secretariat. In a period when most Secretariat units had year-to-year work plans, this was a major innovation.

The objectives set included promotion of the equal rights of men and women, enabling women to participate fully in the development of society and stimulating an awareness among both men and women of women's full potential and of the importance of their contribution to the development of society. Among other measures suggested were three priorities for the Commission on the Status of Women. These included to:

- accord priority to the examination of problems concerning the education of women and their contribution to the economic and social development of their countries;
- consider drafting conventions on the status of women in family law and in other fields of private law, and in all other fields where discrimination exists and where conventions are still missing;
- adapt its programme and methods of work to meet the needs of women in the contemporary world;

The focus on education was a long-term one for the Commission. It had been on the earliest agendas, but had gradually dropped off. Its return reflected a renewed interest in public policy measures. The suggestion on additional conventions was never followed-up, but the underlying point of drafting conventions to deal with discrimination not dealt with by other conventions led to the drafting of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. It was the result of work, which had suggested that the other human rights conventions were dealing primarily with acts committed by States, rather than the acts that were committed by other members of society.

The idea that the Commission should restructure its work program is one that has recurred at least three times since. It was based on the premise that women would be able to use the Commission as a means to articulate views at the international level that their national structures made difficult to express in their own countries. As part of government delegations, as one of the many non-governmental organizations that congregated around Commission sessions, the inter-governmental machinery for advancement of women was different from most of the bodies that had been formed at the outset of the United Nations. During the Cold War, most of these had slipped into routines based on seeming, rather than real progress.

The Secretariat was also preparing for a change. In 1969, the Division for Human Rights was transferred to Geneva. While the rationale provided was to help insulate the human rights program from politics by removing it from the political arena of New York to a calmer Switzerland, the reality was that

the United Nations had run out of space for expansion in New York and an effort was made to move less important units there to fill up available space in the Palais des Nations.

The Status of Women Section was not moved; it remained in New York. There were a number of reasons for this, but the reality was that there was sufficient pressure from non-governmental organizations who argued that moving the Section would have fatally damaged the women's program by cutting it off from its base. It was also true that the work program of the Commission was now far different from that of the Commission for Human Rights and the Status of Women Section was less easy to integrate into the Division for Human Rights than ever.

As a result, the women's program was spared the dislocation that usually accompanies the move of a United Nations unit from one duty station to another, where a high percentage of staff find ways to avoid transfer, new staff are brought on board in the new location, and the support base is completely changed. The dislocation was to come later when, in 1979, the Secretariat unit was moved to Vienna and again in 1993 when it was moved back to New York.

Three issues began to dominate the discourse as the decade of the 1970's approached: a renewed concern with advancement of women in the organizations of the United Nations system, a commitment to draft a comprehensive convention on the elimination of discrimination against women, and, finally a decision to use the vehicle of special events to promote progress.

Reviving the issue of women in the United Nations

After Dag Hamarskjold had told the Commission that the Secretariat would no longer provide it with data on the proportion of women in the international civil service, the issue of participation of women in the United Nations had gradually receded from the agenda. The renewed interest in the operative functions of the organization, as well as in matters of democratic participation, led many women's organizations, as well as women within the United Nations to ask why there weren't more of them.

By 1970, the proportion of women among professionals in the Secretariat had reached 20 percent, lower than in 1949, but higher than in previous decades. The proportion of women in senior management (director level and above) was, at five percent, at its highest level in history. But no one knew this, since staff statistics were not reported broken down by sex.

The Third Committee of the General Assembly, where there was an annual item on advancement of women had become an alternative to the Commission to represent women's concerns. Meeting in the autumn, compared with the late-winter, early-spring meetings of the Commission, the weeklong debate in the Assembly became a vehicle for women to use the higher-level hierarchy of the Assembly to push issues. While the Commission could not request information about staffing, the Assembly could and in 1970, it adopted a resolution which requested the Secretary-General to include in his report to the General Assembly on the composition of the Secretariat data on the employment of women at senior and other professional level, including their numbers and the positions they occupied.

While not the first time, this was part of an emerging process where issues would be raised in the Assembly, handed to the Commission, dealt with in the Commission and handed to the Assembly. It was a process that was gradually refined in the ten years before Beijing, but had begun fifteen years earlier.

Women and the second development decade

The focus of United Nations work, in the light of political stalemates caused by the Cold War and because of the influx of newly independent countries, had shifted increasingly to development issues. Starting with the proclamation of the first United Nations Development Decade in 1962, growth in the organization had become centered on units concerned with economic and social development issues. The

first development decade had not had a plan or program of action, just a statement of objectives in a General Assembly resolution.

The Assembly had decided to prepare a detailed plan for the second decade, which would run from 1971 to 1980. The premise was that, by placing development issues in a plan framework and negotiating them, a framework would be set in place for development cooperation. In practice, the process of drafting the strategies, which took place within the Second Committee of the General Assembly, was a means to confront the increasingly serious differences in approach between developed and developing countries and paper them over.

There was no gender dimension in the first development strategy and, given the almost total absence of women from government delegations working in the Second Committee or in the Secretariat units servicing it, little likelihood that women would be included in the strategy for the Second Development Decade. And the Strategies adopted in 1970 were not women-friendly.

Faced with the situation, using the device of the women's item in the Third Committee, women's advocates in governments, in non-governmental organizations and in the Secretariat succeeded in passing a resolution which, under the guise of "a programme of concerted international action for the advancement of women", presented an addendum to the Strategies that stated women's case for inclusion in development and set its own targets. These minimum targets were grouped in four areas: Education, emphasizing elimination of illiteracy and equal access to education for girls; training and employment, emphasizing non-discrimination and increased opportunities; health and maternity protection, emphasizing availability of maternal and child health services; and administration and public life, emphasizing increases in women in decision-making.

In the text of the resolution was the beginning of the agreed text that allowed development of the idea of women's reproductive and sexual rights. Under the heading of health and maternity protection, the resolution set a minimum target of "Making available to all persons who so desire the necessary information and advice to enable them to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to prepare them for responsible parenthood, including information on the ways in which women can benefit from family planning." The issue of family planning and reproductive rights would be among the most contentious over the next quarter century, but the basis for compromise was laid down in 1970. Expressed at this point as a normative statement that information should be available, it began the long process of defining that women and men have the right to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children.

A step towards a United Nations office for women

When the requested information on women in the organizations of the United Nations system was finally presented to the 26th session of the General Assembly in 1971, the results were shocking to many delegations, and confirmed the suspicion of many that the organization was not women-friendly. At the time, advancement of women was taken up for action only every other year, and it was necessary to wait until the 27th session to act formally. However, in speeches and in the corridors, women delegates and non-governmental organizations began to pressure their governments and the Secretariat on the issue.

The situation that had shocked delegates was expressed in preambular paragraphs of a resolution adopted by the Assembly in 1972. It noted that:

- as at 30 June 1972, no women were employed within the United Nations Secretariat at the Under-Secretary-General or Assistant-Secretary-General level, that only three of the total of 59 employed at the D-2 level were women, and that only four of the total of 181 employed at the D-1 level were women,

- in the less senior and professional ranks of the Secretariat the percentage of women is in inverse proportion to the level of the position, ranging from 6.2 per cent of the staff at the P-5 level to 40.4 per cent at the P-1 level in posts subject to geographical distribution, and from 7.3 per cent at the P-5 level to 39.8 per cent at the P-1 level for the Secretariat as a whole,
- in all the other organizations in the United Nations common system there are no women at the highest levels, only one woman employed at the D-2 level and only 10 women at the D-1 level,

The resolution referred to the grades in the international civil service. These ran from the entry-level P-1 and P-2 grades, through the journeyman grades of P-3 and P-4, to middle management, at the P-5 and D-1 level. The D-1 or Principal Officer grade was the highest rank one could achieve on the basis of career. Senior management, at the D-2 or Director level or as Assistant Secretary-General or Under-Secretary-General are political ranks. The virtual absence of women in senior management meant clearly that their concerns would not be expressed.

Of considerable concern was the fact that the United Nations Secretariat, whose record in appointing women to senior ranks was clearly abysmal, was far better than the Specialized Agencies or the funds and programs of the United Nations.

The resolution's first operative paragraph, however, "Notes with satisfaction the recent appointment by the Secretary-General of a woman to the rank of Assistant Secretary-General and hopes that more women will be appointed to positions at high levels of the United Nations Secretariat."

That woman was Mrs. Helvi Sipila of Finland. Mrs. Sipila had been a member of the Finnish delegation to the Commission on the Status of Women for many years. She was not a government official. A lawyer by profession, Mrs. Sipila came from the NGO community. She had been head of the Girl Scouts in Finland. Having been a member of her government's delegations for many years, she had been named chairman of the Third Committee at its 1971 session.

1971 had seen the election of Kurt Waldheim of Austria as the fourth Secretary-General of the United Nations. It had been a contested election, with a Finn as his main competitor. Under pressure to name a woman to the executive level, he had begun to identify possible names. One of them was Mrs. Sipila. On a trip to Europe, he arranged to interview her. In the course of the interview he went through a process of ascertaining interest and availability, asking Mrs. Sipila whether she might be interested in and available for an appointment. Normally, this is a point prior to making an offer, since the interest and availability of a number of candidates would have been ascertained. Upon leaving the interview, Mrs. Sipila called a news conference and announced that she had been offered the appointment. Under the circumstances, Waldheim had no choice but to confirm the offer.

Mrs. Sipila's style through the ten years that she served as Assistant Secretary-General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs was characterized by this direct style. Not having come from a government bureaucracy, Mrs. Sipila, a small woman with a high forehead and white hair, was never daunted by arguments about why something could not be done. Her response was always, "we can find a way." Later, in the preparations for International Women's Year, she was highly successful in raising extra-budgetary funds for the year, the savings from which became the basis for the United Nations Development Fund for Women.

Her management style was also "un-UN". She would bring her staff together and, occasionally, ask them to join in singing, as befitted someone who had led her country's girl scouts. Many of the staff, particularly the men, were considerably discomfited by the experience, which was rather standard at women's non-governmental gatherings but not at all usual at the United Nations.

The appointment of Mrs. Sipila had the unanticipated consequence of separating the Status of Women Section permanently from the Division for Human Rights. Mrs. Sipila had been appointed with a primary interest in advancement of women. However, the Secretariat unit concerned had only nine staff

members, far too small to be headed by an Assistant Secretary-General. The Secretary-General's office then began to look for other units that could be put together to make up Mrs. Sipila's portfolio.

Since Mrs. Sipila had been chair of the Third Committee, whose formal title was social development and humanitarian affairs, a logical approach would be to give her charge of the social aspects of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. There were some precedents. In the early years of the organization there had been a department of social affairs. However, in 1954, the departments of economic affairs and social affairs had been merged and over the years each had hived off different units. Human rights, for example, had originally been part of the department of social affairs, but as it had become more political, had been shifted to one of the political affairs departments. Housing, which had been part of the social affairs portfolio had become independent sometime in the 1960's; trade and industrial development units had been separated from the economic affairs units.

The bureaucratic solution to giving Mrs. Sipila a portfolio was to graft the Status of Women Section onto part of the Social Development Division. In the process, the social survey and planning functions of the Social Development Division were transferred to be merged with the economic planning functions in another division.⁷ The resulting new entity was called the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs. The humanitarian part was presumably the unit concerned with advancement of women, which was upgraded to a branch and renamed the Branch for the Promotion of Equality between Men and Women.⁸ Fusing social development with advancement of women had the further consequence of forcing an interaction between a human rights unit most of whose staff were lawyers with a unit whose main professional background was social science.

Social development and status of women co-existed in an uneasy organizational relationship under a common head for the next twenty-one years, until yet another reorganized in 1993 placed both as part of a larger department concerned with sustainable development.

Joining a gender balanced Secretariat

I joined the United Nations Secretariat in September 1971 as a staff member of the Regional and Community Development Section of the Social Development Division. After my two years in Venezuela, I had completed my doctorate and gone to teach international communications at the University of Washington. After three years, I had grown restless and contacted the United Nations again about possibly re-joining.

The Division was the remnant of what had originally been the Department of Social Affairs in the early days of the organization. The Division had five sections: Social Welfare, Social Planning, Social Survey, Social Defense (crime prevention and criminal justice) and Regional and Community Development.

What was remarkable for its time, was that the Division had achieved close to gender balance in its professional staffing, including at the management level. Two of the five section chiefs were women, as were some forty percent of the professional staff. For much of its history, the director had been a woman.

⁷ The separation of social survey and planning had the effect of lobotomizing the new unit, which had no mandate to do comprehensive studies of social conditions. The resulting entity became heavily concerned with groups like youth, aging and the disabled.

⁸ In United Nations nomenclature, there is a hierarchy of organizational titles. The largest is a department, headed by an Under-Secretary-General; the next is a centre or office, headed by an Assistant Secretary-General; the next is a Division, headed by a Director (D-2); the next is a Branch, headed by a Chief at the Principal Officer (D-1) level; the next is a Section, headed by a Chief at the Senior Officer (P-5) level. There can also be units, headed by chiefs at anything from the P-3 to P-5 levels, depending on function. A division normally needs an established complement of at least 15 professional posts; a branch normally needs nine and a section normally five. This becomes important at the point when the unit concerned with advancement of women is raised to the level of a division.

Until 1966, it had been headed by Julia Henderson, an American who, after retirement from the UN headed the International Planned Parenthood Federation. It was headed from 1966-1968 by Inga Thorsson of Sweden, who later was famous in the area of disarmament. At the time I joined it was headed by Kurt Jansson of Finland. The Social Planning Section was headed by Gloria Scott of Jamaica who later started a women's program at the World Bank and the Social Welfare Section was headed by Aida Gindy, who later became a regional office head for UNICEF as one of its first women directors.

For women professionals, the Division was one of the few places in the United Nations where entry was not difficult. Its professional staff was recruited from the social sciences, where there were relatively more women and it had women in management positions. As a result, the Division recruited a large number of women who eventually rose to middle and senior management positions in the organization.

With such a gender balance, it was not possible to learn the kinds of beliefs that led to discrimination against women in other United Nations units at the time. These included beliefs such as women were unreliable because they would become pregnant, that they were less mobile than men or that they were not able to work as hard. The women working in the Division were equal to the men in every way. Moreover, such a large number of women made it difficult to have sexist jokes in meetings or corridors or other forms of what we now know as aspects of sexual harassment. But it was also true that in its work, the Division paid little attention to gender differences. Like most units in the United Nations, there was an implicit assumption that development was gender-neutral.

International Women's Year

In 1972, the General Assembly decided to designate 1975 as International Women's Year. The United Nations had a tradition of designating years for specific purposes as a way of focusing attention on issues and providing a basis for mobilizing public support. There had been, for example, an International Geophysical Year. The women in the Third Committee of the General Assembly had seen Women's Year in the context of the Second United Nations Development Decade, where women's concerns had been noticeably absent in the agreed text.

As it happened, 1972 was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Commission on the Status of Women and, as the resolution adopted by the Assembly stated, "this is a period which makes it possible to take stock of the positive results obtained". Appraisal of progress was a starting point, but the resolution set out three themes for the year that continued to structure the debate at the intergovernmental level for the next twenty years from International Women's Year to Beijing.

The first was to promote equality between men and women. This was the original purpose of the women's program and was particularly supported by the developed countries of the West, including the United States.

The second was "to ensure the full integration of women in the total development effort, especially by emphasizing women's responsibility and important role in economic, social and cultural development at the national, regional and international levels, particularly during the Second United Nations Development Decade." This was the issue that had emerged during the Sixties and was strongly supported by developing countries.

The third was "to recognize the importance of women's increasing contribution to the development of friendly relations and cooperation among States and to the strengthening of world peace." This objective was strongly supported by the Soviet Union and the Socialist countries of Eastern Europe.

Only the objective of equality was uncontroversial. The objective of development was linked to the emerging debates about whether development was mainly a matter of national policy or of the international economic environment. The locus of responsibility for development was a major issue in the mainstream, dividing the developed from the developing countries. This injected United Nations North-

South politics into the women's arena. The objective of peace was considered by Western countries as purely political and unrelated to women's concerns and provided a link with a wide variety of controversial issues, such as Palestine and *apartheid* for which there was no consensus. In fact, both issues had a gender dimension, but in their discussion, the focus had tended to be less on that than on the wider political issue.

The elaboration of a detailed plan for celebrating the year was handed over to the Commission on the Status of Women, which was meeting on a biennial schedule and would next meet in 1974. There was no precedent for how to celebrate an international year for a part of the population, so the creation of that plan would require considerable creativity.

The Commission met in the spring of 1974 and determined that the best way to organize the year would be to call an international conference. This would be, in the words of the draft resolution it sent forward for adoption by the Economic and Social Council,

an international conference during the International Women's Year to examine to what extent the organizations of the United Nations system have implemented the recommendations for the elimination of discrimination against women made by the Commission on the Status of Women since its establishment, and to launch an international action programme including short-term and long-term measures aimed at achieving the integration of women as full and equal partners with men in the total development effort and eliminating discrimination on grounds of sex, and at achieving the widest involvement of women in strengthening international peace and eliminating racism and racial discrimination.

Calling international conferences had been a standard method of the United Nations since the beginning. They had mostly been in the political field, but had also become standard in the economic field. Since 1972, there had been a series of conferences on trade and development. For many years there had been quinquennial conferences on crime prevention. There had been the human rights conference in Teheran. However, the major impulses for a women's conference were the first United Nations conference on the environment, held in Stockholm in 1972 and the first United Nations conference on population held in Bucharest in 1974. Both of these conferences had led to the adoption of action plans or programs and had mobilized considerable effort by non-governmental organizations. Among advocates of specific issues, it had been found that the visibility given by a conference far outweighed what was often an unwieldy process.

While there was clearly no women's dimension to the Stockholm conference on environment, since this was considered to be a completely gender-neutral issue if any consideration was given at all to gender, as one of her first major initiatives, Mrs. Sipila had promoted a series of regional seminars on women and population as part of the preparations for the Bucharest Conference. While it might be considered bizarre today, population issues in the 1970's were not considered from a gender perspective. This was because demographers were the intellectuals behind the issue and population was considered a technical subject. It was considered by the Second (Economic) Committee of the General Assembly. And not surprisingly, both the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) and the Population Division of the Secretariat were headed by men, who made up most of United Nations senior management in this period.

Mrs. Sipila raised funds for a women's approach, which succeeded in promoting some reflection on gender issues. The main issue at Bucharest, of course, was family planning and population control. Conservative forces, led by the Holy See, sought to limit language on family planning and on abortion. Many developing countries saw any emphasis on population control as a means of stifling growth in developing countries (a position also taken about environmental protection.)

A difficulty in planning for the International Conference on International Women's Year was that it had been called on very short notice. The Commission on the Status of Women was not scheduled to meet again until 1976. The budget of the United Nations for the biennium 1974-1975 had already been

approved and contained no provision for the preparations of the Conference.⁹ This last meant that the substantive preparations would have to be made by the existing staff of the Branch for the Promotion of Equality Between Men and Women.

To fill some of the gaps, the Assembly passed a separate resolution establishing a Consultative Committee for the Conference of the International Women's Year that would meet for two weeks in March 1975 to advise the Secretary-General on the preparation of an international plan of action to be finalized by the Conference. In the absence of regular budget funds for the meeting of the committee, it decided to finance the meeting from extra-budgetary funds drawn from a fund for voluntary contributions for the International Women's Year that had been established in May of 1974. Finally, the Assembly asked the Secretary-General to prepare a draft international plan of action in time to be considered by the Consultative Committee.

These three elements: a preparatory committee to agree on plans of action, a voluntary fund, and a Secretariat draft of the plan, became standard procedures for the successive women's conferences, as each built on the experience of its predecessor.

Time was extremely short from the adoption of the resolution in draft by the Third Committee in late October 1974 until the Consultative Committee was to meet in March 1975. Since the United Nations is expected to work in six languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish) and absolutely must work in three of them (English, French and Spanish), and since documents are supposed to be issued six weeks prior to a meeting to allow review at national capitals, the real deadline for completion of documentation for a meeting in March is early January. The Secretariat was given a significant challenge to prepare a document that could be used as a basis for negotiation.

Although the original idea was to have the Conference at United Nations Headquarters, an invitation was made by the Government of Mexico to hold the conference in Mexico City. There are always many motives for inviting a UN conference. For women's conferences it is often seen by women in the host country as a means of advancing the women's cause there. That was clearly a motive in Mexico where a combination of women in political positions and younger women in the Mexican foreign ministry advocated for the invitation.

What was finally called the World Conference of the International Women's Year was held in Mexico City for two weeks from 19 June to 2 July 1975. It took place in the conference facilities of the Mexican foreign ministry itself.

The Conference adopted the World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Women's Year and the Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and Their Contribution to Development and Peace. In it was a recommendation that the General Assembly designate the period 1975-1985 as United Nations Decade for Women¹⁰.

The plan of action was intended to cover the decade. Looked at with hindsight, it is a remarkable document, foreshadowing in its 219 paragraphs most of the issues that were to be addressed in greater detail in Beijing. The plan was substantively structured in terms of nine categories of issues. Many were precursors to issues that would be dealt with in Beijing. They included (with the corresponding Beijing category in parentheses):

- international cooperation and the strengthening of international peace (women and armed conflict);
- political participation (women in power and decision-making);

⁹ The costs of servicing the conference itself in terms of translation and interpretation could be covered through a generous contingency provision that had been built into the conference-servicing budget of the Organization.

¹⁰ In the haste of drafting, many times small errors occur. The period 1975-1985 is one year longer than a decade. The matter was corrected when the General Assembly proclaimed the Decade in December 1975.

- education and training (women and education and training);
- employment and related economic roles (women and the economy);
- health and nutrition (women and health);
- the family in modern society (women and human rights; the girl child);
- population (women and health);
- housing and related facilities;
- other social questions.

A number of agreements reached set the stage for further development.

First, the Plan of Action requested that “High priority should be given to the preparation and adoption of the convention on the elimination of discrimination against women, with effective procedures for its implementation.” At its 1974 session, the Commission on the Status of Women had decided to begin work on a convention that would implement the provisions of the 1967 Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. The Conference agreement placed this all-important task on a fast track.

The Plan of Action carried the concept of reproductive rights one step further by declaring that “Individuals and couples have the right freely and responsibly to determine the number and spacing of their children and to have the information and the means to do so. The exercise of this right is basic to the attainment of any real equality between the sexes and without its achievement women are disadvantaged in their attempt to benefit from other reforms.” In a later paragraph in the section on health, it referred to “the right of women to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information and means to enable them to exercise that right has a decisive impact on their ability to take advantage of educational and employment opportunities and to participate fully in community life as responsible citizens.”

While it did not specify any optimal level or range, the Plan called on Governments to “establish goals, strategies and timetables for increasing within the decade 1975-1985 the number of women in elective and appointive public offices and public functions at all levels.”

The Plan of Action made wide-ranging recommendations about the need to obtain better statistical information about women and expanded the scope of issues about which these should be obtained. The recommendations were far ahead of the thinking of mainstream statisticians, especially in their emphasis on economic indicators like food production, on the use of time-use data and on measuring unremunerated work. The Plan stated that:

“167. All census and survey data relating to characteristics of individuals (e.g., urban/rural residence, age, marital status, including consensual unions, literacy, education, income, level of skills and participation in both modern and traditional economic activities) and to household and family composition should be reported and analysed by sex.

168. In the collection of such data special efforts should be made to measure:

(a) The participation of women in local and national planning and policy-making in all sectors of national life;

(b) The extent of women's activities in food production (cash crop and subsistence agriculture), in water and fuel supply, in marketing, and in transportation;

(c) The economic and social contribution of housework and other domestic chores, handicrafts and other home-based economic activities;

(d) The effect on the national economy of women's activities as consumers of goods and services;

- (e) The relative time spent on economic and household activities and on leisure by girls and women compared to boys and men;
- (f) The quality of life (e.g., job satisfaction, income situation, family characteristics and use of leisure time).

169. The United Nations system should extend the scope of its standards for data collection, tabulation and analysis to take the above recommendations into account. National statistical offices should adhere to the standards established by the United Nations and its specialized agencies.”

But the Plan of Action had missed a number of issues that were later to become crucial, reflecting the state of play at the time. In 1974, advancement of women was still considered a marginal issue in the mainstream of the United Nations. There was no mention of violence against women in the text, other than in connection with trafficking for prostitution. There was no mention of the environment. Unlike other conferences, where an outcome had been creation of new institutions or increasing the resources to existing ones. The Stockholm Conference had led to the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The Bucharest Conference had led to the strengthening of the Population Division and an increase in the autonomy and importance of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA). Mexico City did not deal with institutional questions.

More importantly, while the Plan of Action was agreed by consensus, the accompanying Declaration was adopted on the basis of a vote. There were many reasons. A major one was that in the Mexico City Declaration was found the statement “... women of the entire world, whatever differences exist between them, share the painful experience of receiving or having received unequal treatment, and that as their awareness of this phenomenon increases they will become natural allies in the struggle against any form of oppression, such as is practised under colonialism, *zionism*, racial discrimination and apartheid, thereby constituting an enormous revolutionary potential for economic and social change in the world today.”

The reference was to a text that had been voted the previous year in the General Assembly that affirmed that Zionism, the campaign to obtain for Jewish people their own State, was a form of racism. A number of countries, including particular, the United States had voted against the resolution.

At the intergovernmental level, as would be shown over and over again, words or how ideas are expressed have a special importance. Governments who accept language implicitly agree to abide by it. This is the origin of most of the late night negotiations in intergovernmental bodies. Once a text is agreed, those who favor it must ensure that it is always included where relevant, since failure to do so would be a signal of a change in priority. For those who oppose a text, leaving it in a document uncontested implies acceptance of the concept.

There was other language that was problematic. In one paragraph, referring to development, the Plan of Action stated that “The developing countries, which account for 70 per cent of the population of the world, receive only 30 per cent of world income. It has proved impossible to achieve uniform and balanced development of the international community under the present economic order, and, for this reason, it is urgent to implement a new international economic order in accordance with General Assembly resolution 3201 (S-VI of 1 May 1974).”

A special session of the General Assembly had been held the year previous, in essence to revise the International Development Strategy for the Second United Nations Development Decade. In contrast to the Strategy, which involved a delicate balance between the developed country views that development was a responsibility mostly of the developing countries and the main vehicle was national reforms and the view of the developing countries that development implied transfers of resources and adjusting the international economic environment, the Sixth Special Session came down strongly in favor of development as requiring a fundamental restructuring of international economic relations in favor of the “have nots”. The result was

called a New International Economic Order, and it was opposed by the United States and a number of other developed countries.

The United States, confronted with the language on Zionism and on the new international economic order, felt that it had no choice but to oppose the Declaration because of the language and voted against. The vote was 89 in favor, three opposed and 18 abstentions. The Plan of Action was adopted with the proviso that all statements made about it, which included reservations, were to be appended.

A United Nations document is valid for those who voted in its favor, but, while formally a loser in an election could formally be said to be morally bound by the outcome, in fact under a system of sovereign equality of nations, they are not legally bound to its provisions. That is why most United Nations resolutions, declarations and plans of action are adopted by consensus. The fact that the final documents of the Mexico City conference were not adopted by consensus reflected a failure in the process. It was a failure faced by most United Nations conferences over the period.

Further, when a document is adopted by consensus, countries can enter reservations to specific portions. This means that, while they may accept the general thrust of the document, they will not be bound by some language. It has the effect of giving a partial negative vote. If there are too many reservations, a document agreed by consensus can become meaningless.

For women delegates from developing countries, equality could not be achieved without development and development required an adjustment of the international economic environment. The delegates also saw a link between political oppression of a wider sort and suppression of women.

For women delegates from developed countries, especially the United States, the introduction of what they considered to be extraneous political issues into a debate about women was an intrusion. Moreover, they were bound by their country's policies of consistency in international forums.

The position of women critics was reinforced, however, when the political issues came to the fore. At that point, the women delegates who had been negotiating on behalf of their governments would suddenly be replaced in their seats by mostly male members of delegations to the General Assembly who had been involved in the wider negotiations. This was a problem that would continue up to Beijing.

Mexico City set the bases for much progress; it also brought into the open some problems that would frustrate the march to Beijing for much of the next twenty years.

Chapter Two. Mexico City to Nairobi: the United Nations Decade for Women 1976-1985

When the General Assembly took up the results of the Mexico City Conference in the fall of 1975, it had to confront the political issues that had been stirred up at the Conference. It was customary for the Assembly to consider, and usually endorse, the Plan of Action of a major conference. The Assembly did not do so. Instead, it said that the organizations of the United Nations system should monitor and periodically review and appraise progress towards achieving the objectives of the Conference.

A number of resolutions were passed, one each dealing with equality, development and peace. The equality resolution called upon the Commission on the Status of Women to complete work on a convention on the elimination of discrimination against women. The development resolution called for the full integration of women into the development process, both as a matter of right and as a major untapped resource. The peace resolution emphasized women's contribution to the peace process and the need to address various forms of political oppression. It reaffirmed "the principles promulgated in the Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and Their Contribution to Development and Peace". It conspicuously ignored any reference to Zionism!

The Assembly did follow one of the Mexico City recommendations and designed 1976-1985 as the United Nations Decade for Women. In so doing, it promulgated a series of considerations about the United Nations system, about the role of the Commission on the Status of Women, about the resources for the secretariat and about next steps.

The recommendation that there should be a joint approach by all of the organizations of the United Nations system to implementation, including the preparation of a system-wide plan reflected a clear understanding that any effort to mobilize the international community for advancement of women meant involving the various specialized agencies like the FAO, UNESCO, the ILO and the World Bank, as well as UN funds like UNDP and UNICEF. The notion that coordination was important became a major *leitmotiv* of all UN conferences in the economic and social areas. The recommendation led to the establishment, in time, of a network of focal points in the organizations of the system who met at least once a year to concert policy.

Considering that the Commission on the Status of Women had been the main focus at the intergovernmental level for advancement of women for, by that time, some thirty years, the Assembly's charge to it was lukewarm. It noted "that the Conference recommended the continuing operation of the Commission on the Status of Women or some other representative body, within the structure of the United Nations, designed specifically to deal with matters relating to the status of women, so as to ensure the implementation of ongoing projects designed to carry out the programmes set forth in the World Plan of Action." The resolution made no other mention of the Commission.

In this sense, the Assembly was reflecting a broader trend. The United Nations was in the throes of a major restructuring, this one designed to equip the organization to implement the new development tasks agreed at the Sixth and Seventh Special Sessions. Among the reform themes was a periodic streamlining of intergovernmental machinery, and the Commission, perceived as weak and marginal by the largely male delegates and experts, was an obvious target. So too was its Secretariat.

The resolution also called for steps to begin the process of establishing a United Nations Institute for Training and Research for the Advancement of Women. This idea had emerged from Mexico City as a means of filling the research gaps that had been identified and as an instrument for providing development services for women. It also reflected a belief that the Secretariat unit, the Branch for the Promotion of Equality between Men and Women, was not capable of the kind of in-depth research and outreach that was needed. The new institution was to be funded from extra-budgetary resources.

The resolution did request the provision of additional resources for the Branch, in language that constituted a polite request to treat the women well. The resolution requested the Secretary-General "to ensure, if possible within existing resources, that the Secretariat unit responsible for women's questions

possesses adequate personnel and budgetary resources in order to discharge its functions under the World Plan of Action in cooperation with all organizations of the United Nations system.” The language, including especially the reference to “existing resources” allowed the Secretary-General (or rather his Budget Division) to state that the existing resource levels were adequate.

The program budget for the next biennium, 1976-1977, had been prepared and reviewed before the Mexico City Conference had taken place and additional resources for the Decade had not been included in it. Consequently, the resolution further requested “the Secretary-General to take into account the requirements of the World Plan of Action and related resolutions of the Conference in preparing revised estimates for 1977 and the medium-term plan for 1978-1981 and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its thirty-first session, in accordance with established procedures.” This was an invitation to the Secretary-General to ask for increased resources if he so chose. He chose to ask for a few, but not many.

Finally, the Assembly accepted the Conference recommendation to convene “in 1980, at the mid-term of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, a world conference of all States to review and evaluate the progress made in implementing the objectives of the International Women's Year as recommended by the World Conference of the International Women's Year and, where necessary, to readjust existing programmes in the light of new data and research available.”

A women's seminar in Pakistan

I was not at Mexico City. In fact, while the Conference was taking place I was observing it through press releases in Islamabad, Pakistan. At the request of Kurt Jansson, who had left the Social Development Division at the moment that Mrs. Sipilä had been appointed Assistant Secretary-General and had been named Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme in Pakistan, I had accepted a secondment to that office as Assistant Resident Representative.

The three Assistant Resident Representatives' main job was to oversee the budgetary and operational management of projects of various United Nations organizations. Having come from the United Nations Secretariat, I was put in charge of projects executed by the United Nations.

International Women's Year had stirred an interest in the development agencies, including UNDP, to do something for women. Jansson, as a good Nordic, was committed to this. The problem was that Pakistan was a country where all government officials were men, where women were not expected to work (although this was true only of the middle and upper classes; poor women always worked) and, to the extent that fundamentalist Islam was dominant, as in the Northwest Frontier Provinces and Baluchistan, were not even expected to be seen. Moreover, all of the UNDP officials, like most aid officials, were also men.

What to do? There were very few easy projects to imagine. The one easy project was to organize a seminar on the follow-up to the year. This was in fact consistent with the resolution proclaiming the Decade which called upon “Governments, as a matter of urgency, to examine the recommendations contained in the World Plan of Action and related resolutions of the Conference including action to be taken at the national level.”

The Government of Pakistan in 1975 was headed by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and was a modernizing government, although one very careful about its political base. It was receptive to the idea of a follow-up seminar that could possibly lead to recommendations about government action. Accordingly, funds were appropriated for a seminar, including for the hiring of a consultant to help prepare it.

The consultant was a French feminist who had worked in Africa on mobilization of women and had been at Mexico City. A program was organized and a background study prepared.

The seminar took place at the Rawalpindi Intercontinental Hotel and was attended by wives of senior government officials, university professors, women from the United Nations agencies and

diplomatic missions. It was opened by Begum Nusrat Bhutto, the wife of the prime minister, who had headed Pakistan's delegation to Mexico City.

I do not recall what was concluded by the meeting. I remember thinking that this was not a very practical project.

If I think back on it after some twenty years, I realize that, under the circumstances, it was a particularly effective follow-up. It legitimized a link between an internationally-agreed plan and national action, if only among the elite. It generated a sense that advancement of women was important and, perhaps many of the ideas that were radical at the time, penetrated to the women present and to their daughters.

Begum Nusrat's daughter, Benazir, of course, became Prime Minister of Pakistan. I do not claim credit for our seminar for this development, but who knows?

The early decision to hold the second world conference on women meant that a preparatory process could be done with more care and precision than had been the case for Mexico City. Over the next five years, there were three issues that structured the march: the drafting of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the preparatory process itself, and the move of the women's Secretariat to Vienna, Austria. Most of these were set in 1976, the next year.

1. Drafting the women's Magna Carta

Mexico City gave renewed impulse to the long process of working out a women's human rights convention, a kind of Magna Carta.

In fact, the Commission on the Status of Women, at its 24th session in 1972, had decided to begin the process of formulating an international convention. At its 25th session in 1974, a working group of the Commission submitted draft texts to the members of the Commission. The Commission decided, on 24 January 1974, by a vote of 22 to none, with 4 abstentions, "that a single comprehensive draft convention should be prepared..."

The draft circulated to governments reflected the decision taken by the working group that it would not vote on any of the articles.¹ As a consequence, whenever the working group had not reached consensus and alternative texts had been proposed, or recommendations or reservations had been made, this was reflected in connection with the relevant draft articles. This procedure was followed by the working group throughout its existence, first in the Commission (in 1974) and after that in the Third Committee of the General Assembly (in 1977, 1978, and 1979). In each instance, the provision in question was transmitted for further action to the parent body reflecting this lack of consensus. This procedure of sending forward text that had not yet been agreed (or, in UN-ese, "placed within square brackets" to be worked out in higher bodies was eventually followed at Beijing.

Because Governments who were elected to the Commission were those who most supported advancement of women, it always proved easier to achieve agreements in that body, where decisions are usually taken by consensus. The matters became more difficult when debate moved to the General Assembly, which also tries to make decisions by consensus but where governments that are less favorable to women's advancement can block agreement. This proved to be the case with the Convention as it would later with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

¹ The paragraphs on the negotiation of the Convention draw heavily on a study prepared for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women by the Division for the Advancement of Women in 1975, as part of that Committee's preparations to participate in Beijing. The Committee did not particularly care for the study and it remained on the record as a document of the Committee (CEDAW/C/1995/7).

Based on the replies received from 40 governments, four specialized agencies and 10 NGOs and further extensive discussion at the 26th session, the Commission on the Status of Women was able to conclude its efforts. In adopting its draft, the Commission voted on several articles, including what later became article 9(2), and article 16 of the Convention. Numerous amendments to articles were rejected by vote, or were included by vote. The draft Convention as a whole was adopted by the Commission without a vote on December 17, 1976, and subsequently submitted to the Economic and Social Council for adoption by the General Assembly.

No discussion on the draft took place in the Economic and Social Council. Instead, the draft was circulated once again to member states inviting their early comments on the draft, which, together with a report of the Secretary-General analyzing the comments received, was submitted to the General Assembly at its 32nd session "with a view of adopting the Convention at that session". (Economic and Social Council resolution 2058 (LXII) of 12 May 1977.)

With the submission of the Commission's text to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly, the substantive thrust of the future Convention had largely been established. The negotiations in the working group of the Third Committee tightened and sharpened the content, deleted or consolidated certain redundancies, and broadened some articles, as well as certain preambular provisions.

On the basis of the draft submitted to it and of further comments received from member states, the General Assembly agreed to a number of changes.

Extensive discussions took place with regard to the monitoring machinery, but the principle that there would be some kind of supervision with regard to the implementation of the Convention had already been established by the CSW. The issues now under discussion centered on whether the CSW itself, an ad hoc committee of the CSW, or a separate body should be entrusted with monitoring the implementation of the Convention. After lengthy debate, agreement was reached on the establishment of an independent expert body to monitor implementation. Furthermore, while the reporting procedure itself was not in doubt, the General Assembly reviewed its periodicity and content. Additional procedures, such as inter-state and individual complaints procedures were considered for possible inclusion in the Convention, but were ultimately rejected.

A working group of the Third Committee of the General Assembly held a total of 12 meetings in 1977, and 21 meetings in 1978, finalizing its work on all but the implementation mechanism, the reservations article and the preamble.

In 1979, the working group submitted its completed draft to the Third Committee. In introducing the report, the Chairperson of the working group informed the Committee that, since it had been impossible to reach agreement on certain provisions, i.e. on implementation, all the Third Committee needed to do was to vote on the alternatives provided. Several delegates also submitted last-minute substantive amendments concerning the preamble, articles 5, 6, 9 and 16, but most of them were rejected in recorded votes. The provision on the implementation machinery was adopted by a non-recorded vote of 98 in favor, 1 against, and 12 abstentions.

The Convention as a whole was adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 1979 by a vote of 130-0-11. In adopting the resolution, the General Assembly expressed its hope that the Convention would come into force at an early date, and requested the Secretary-General to present the text of the Convention to the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women for its information.

Completing a triumvirate of women's institutions

In 1976 also, two additional United Nations institutions for advancement of women were established. The first was the United Nations Institute for Training and Research for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), which had been suggested at Mexico City. INSTRAW was not given a very clear mandate to determine what it was to do, other than that it "... should direct its activities with special

attention to the needs of women in developing countries and their integration in the development process.”² It was to be funded completely from voluntary sources.

The resolution also took note of the offer by the Government of Iran to host the Institute and instructed that it be made operational as soon as the financial basis was secured. In fact, it took three years for enough money to be raised and the Institute eventually began work in 1979 in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

The second institution was titled the Voluntary Fund for the United Nations Decade for Women. Mrs. Sipila had been extremely successful in raising extra-budgetary funds for International Women’s Year and when the accounts were added up, there was a significant surplus of un-spent funds. The General Assembly had decided to extend the Fund to cover the Decade and had asked the Secretariat to propose arrangements on how to manage and use its resources.

In 1976, the Assembly, based on a report prepared by the Secretariat, agreed that the Fund should be used to supplement resources for the Decade, emphasizing technical cooperation but also making resources available for communication, for research and for strengthening regional and global institutions. It established a Consultative Committee to “to advise the Secretary-General on the application to the use of the Fund of the criteria” it had set out. It also allowed the Fund to participate in the Pledging Conferences from which the major development programs like UNDP and UNICEF raised funds.³

The Voluntary Fund was eventually converted into the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) on the eve of the Nairobi Conference.

2. Preparing for Copenhagen

In 1976, the Commission on the Status of Women decided to prepare a programme for the Decade. Reflecting the fact that the Mexico City Plan of Action had been dead on arrival, the idea was to create a consensus document that would carry forward the agreed parts of the Plan. The program for the Decade was negotiated based on a draft prepared by the Secretariat which excerpted elements from the Plan as well as a series of resolutions on specific issues that had been adopted at the Conference and that had universal acceptance.

The term “Zionism” did not appear and, although there were a number of references to the new international economic order, the most operative expression was couched in extremely tentative and delicate language: “Priority should be given to the elaboration of programmes which *tend towards* the implementation of the new international economic order in order to help eliminate situations in which any human being may be exploited or left out of society and to emphasize that inadequate conditions of the population, including the female population, are closely linked to the *inadequate internal structures* of countries. [Emphasis added].”

The program was organized in three sections, one each for the objectives of equality, development and peace and within each the actions to be taken were divided between the period 1976-1980 and 1981-1985. The program focused on the first five years. It also divided tasks between national, regional and global levels. Despite the role of the Commission on the Status of Women in the preparations for Mexico City and the fact that the program for the Decade initiated in the Commission, the program did not assign a strong monitoring role to the Commission, whose realm of activity was centered on the objectives of

² Document 54: ECOSOC resolution establishing INSTRAW as an autonomous body funded through voluntary contributions, and setting guidelines for its work, including, among other things, that the Institute should direct its activities with special attention to the needs of women in developing countries and their integration in the development process.

³ Document 56: General Assembly resolution adopting the criteria for the management of the Voluntary Fund for the United Nations Decade for Women.

equality and peace. There was an obvious discomfort in having the Commission deal with issues of development.

In fact, in beginning preparations for the second United Nations women's conference, the General Assembly in 1977 decided to set up a special preparatory body for the conference, by-passing the Commission completely. It also accepted an offer from the Government of Iran to host the conference.

In substantive terms, the Assembly decided that, in addition to the three themes of the Decade (equality, development and peace), there should be three sub-themes, all related to development. These were education, health and employment. To an extent this was a reaction to what was perceived to have been the rights orientation of the Mexico City conference, although it also reflected the dominant politics of the General Assembly that were focused on the North-South disagreements about development policies.

Troubles with the Conference became evident in 1978. First, Iran withdrew its offer to host the conference.

The fall of the Shah of Iran dramatically changed that country's global position. As part of his program of modernization, the so-called White Revolution, the Shah had challenged the fundamentalist religious leaders in the country. One of main irritants was an emphasis on the emancipation of women. Pressed by his sister, Princess Ashraf, he had made a number of international initiatives designed to align Iran with the West. This included inviting INSTRAW to locate in Teheran (and providing the first contribution to its trust fund). It also included offering to host the second world conference on women.

It would be simplistic to assume that the revolution led by the Ayatollah Khomeini was fueled by women's emancipation. The causes went more deeply than that, but clearly women's emancipation was a perceived factor. It was the beginning of a fundamentalist movement that began slowly to challenge gains being made for women in the Middle East and other Islamic countries.

The second problem had to do with the Secretariat. Within the United Nations, the Branch for the Promotion of the Equality between Men and Women had been expected to be the secretariat for the Conference, for which Copenhagen had become the substitute venue. It had been assumed that Mrs. Sipila, who continued to be Assistant Secretary-General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, would be the conference secretary-general.

However, in the 1978 resolution adopting the agenda of the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, an operative paragraph requested the Secretary-General to "appoint as soon as possible a Secretary-General of the Conference, at the level of Assistant Secretary-General ... from outside the United Nations system and from a developing country."⁴ In other words, someone other than Mrs. Sipila.

To a certain extent this reflected the trend emphasizing development and a need to ensure that United Nations programs were responsive to the developing countries. But, although she was from Finland, Mrs. Sipila had been actively concerned with development issues during her long tenure with the Commission as a government representative and had been active in creating the Voluntary Fund.

What had happened was that Mrs. Sipila had agreed to move the United Nations women's program to Vienna. The reaction to this was found in the same General Assembly resolution, which went on to request the Secretary-General

"to ensure that the secretariat of the Conference, which shall be located at United Nations Headquarters, will be composed of a full-time Secretary-General, as well as the appropriate members of the Advancement of Women Branch of the Center for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat and the necessary additional staff for the preparation of the

⁴ Document 63: General Assembly resolution adopting the agenda for the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace.

Conference, the secretariat to work in close cooperation with the Centre as a whole, which is the focal point of the activities of the Decade.”

3. Moving to Vienna

When Kurt Waldheim was elected Secretary-General of the United Nations, the Government of Austria under the socialist chancellor Bruno Kreisky had embarked on a policy of re-inserting Austria into the international arena. It had offered to host the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) when that had been founded in 1956 and had taken on board the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). Its physical position between East and West, coupled with its constitutional neutrality, made it a useful point to locate institutions that involved East-West transactions.

By the 1960's, the growing United Nations in New York had filled up the office space in the Secretariat building, but the United States government had been unwilling to finance the construction of additional office space. By the early 1970's a growing part of the United Nations budget was being devoted to renting commercial office space to house its departments and Member States concerned with budgetary growth were beginning to clamor for a solution. A similar situation was occurring in the United Nations offices in Geneva, Switzerland.

In the light of this, the Government of Austria decided to build, using its own funds, a United Nations office complex in the Donaupark next to the Danube. They had noticed that international organizations had economic multiplier effects on the cities in which they were located and that, moreover, the construction of the complex would generate employment for a country in the midst of a recession. The proposed complex, however, was designed to house more entities than the IAEA and UNIDO.

The obvious solution was to move surplus units from New York and Geneva to occupy the vacant office space. The question was which units.

Within the General Assembly, the matter of office space was considered in the Fifth (Administrative and Financial) Committee, as a technical matter of budgeting. There was a standing item on use of the Donaupark facility. The facilities were expected to be ready for occupation in 1979.

Moves of an office from one duty station to another are extremely disruptive, both to the staff involved and to the programs for which they work. Considerable time is lost in transit, as files are packed, shipped by sea, and unpacked. Support staff, who are locally recruited, undergo a complete changeover. Professional staff, many of whom have resided in the current duty station for many years, are unwilling to leave and many transfer.

More importantly, New York is the center of the United Nations' political universe. A move to another duty station, especially a new one like Vienna, was considered by the various units in New York as the equivalent of exile to a desert island. As a result, no units volunteered to go.

Secretary-General Waldheim, who had been a failed candidate for President of Austria and who, it was said at the time, still aspired to the post, carefully cultivated his national political ties and was sensitive to the pressure to identify units to be sent to occupy the Donaupark. In practice, he needed to find units that had visibility and appeared to be important, but were not important enough to generate political opposition in the General Assembly. If they were headed by managers who could not say no, so much the better.

Together with his staff, he identified three units: the Division of Narcotic Drugs, which was located in Geneva and was not considered important at the time; the International Trade Law Branch of the Office of Legal Affairs, located in New York and concerned with arcane issues such as the forms of bills of lading; and the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs (CSDHA) including what had been titled after Mexico City the Advancement of Women Branch.

In 1976, a major effort at restructuring the economic and social sectors was underway in the General Assembly and it was anticipated that the old Department of Economic and Social Affairs would be broken up in some way. Pieces were therefore loose.

It remained to obtain the agreement of Mrs. Sipila. It is said that the Secretary-General approached Mrs. Sipila while she was on a trip to Austria to visit a European Social Welfare Center that was being created there as an offshoot of the CSDHA. There is no record of the conversation. Presumably, he made her an offer she could not refuse. It was a year in which her contract was up for renewal. Mrs. Sipila, a European, felt that the women's program could benefit by contact with Europe and a reduction in influence of American feminism.

When her staff learned that she had agreed to move the program to Vienna, it was aghast. In addition to the personal disruption, they believed that moving it to Vienna would serve to marginalize the program. Moving the Branch just before the conference in 1980 would critically affect the conference preparations. It became obvious to the senior staff that the decision was irreversible: the financial imperatives of the Fifth Committee far outweighed any programmatic concerns of the Third Committee.

Some staff left. Margaret Bruce, who had headed first the Status of Women Section and then the Branch since 1962, took early retirement in 1977 in frustration.

Other staff began to work to remove the responsibility for the conference from Mrs. Sipila. While the Secretariat is neutral, it often provides advice to government delegates, advice which is often adopted in resolutions. In this case, it resulted in the resolution creating a special conference secretariat headed by a new conference secretary-general.

Secretary-General Waldheim was under great pressure to appoint a conference secretary-general. He was also under pressure to appoint a female under-secretary-general, the highest rank below his own. On March 8, which is celebrated as International Women's Day, he promised to appoint a woman as under-secretary-general. In his usual fashion, he killed two birds with one stone by appointing a woman as Secretary-General of the Women's Conference at the under-secretary-general level. Since the post was temporary, it had no long-term implications.

The person appointed was Lucille Mair of Jamaica. Ms. Mair had begun her career as a noted sociologist/anthropologist who had written a definitive study of growing up in the Caribbean. She was an embodiment of the strong Caribbean woman, many of whom had gone on to reach political leadership positions. She had gone on to a career in university teaching and eventually in the Jamaican foreign service. She brought an understanding of the issues of development along with a finely honed diplomatic skill to the job of organizing the conference. She was joined on the conference secretariat by most of the senior staff of the Branch.

When the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs moved to Vienna in 1979, the Branch was headed by Mrs. Manae Kubota of Japan, a former head of the Women's Bureau of the Japanese Ministry of Labor. Of the staff that had been on board in 1977, only three moved to Vienna. The remaining staff that moved were recruited for Vienna service to replace those who had transferred to other units in New York. The Branch ceased to be a player in the Copenhagen process.

Women and the agrarian reform conference

I returned to New York from Pakistan in the summer of 1976, to the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs. I rejoined the regional and community development section, but was soon given an additional assignment to work on a task force concerned with coordinating a departmental approach to integrated rural development.

1974 had seen the first World Food Conference in Rome, called to react to what was perceived to be a looming problem of feeding the world. Among the solutions was to find ways of improving the lot of poor farmers. Initially under the lead of the World Bank, it was decided that integrated rural development, an approach that emphasized provision of a variety of services, including agricultural, economic and social services, was desirable. A joint inter-agency approach involving the main specialized agencies of the United Nations, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, UNESCO, the ILO, UNDP and others was agreed.

The head of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs was convinced that United Nations Secretariat participation in an interagency needed the input of his entire department and he set up a task force for the purpose. I was named secretary of the task force, since the Social Development Division had historically dealt with issues of rural development under the heading of community development. The task force was composed of a number of divisions and branches, including the Branch for the Advancement of Women, who had received a number of mandates relating to rural women.

The task force, largely made up of younger professionals, attempted to define what the United Nations could do to support integrated rural development. One of the most active participants was a Brazilian economist named Nouracy de Souza, from the Branch. Nouracy was a fast-talking, often-disheveled activist feminist. She made the argument that most development policies affected women differently, especially in the area of trade.

Trade was one of the areas where it was assumed that there were no gender effects, but her arguments, based on micro-studies of women traders, the role of women as consumers of traded products and the employment dimensions of trade, were convincing enough that the task force included them in the joint paper. I remember presenting the result to the new Under-Secretary-General for International Economic Affairs, Jean Ripert, a French economist who had been chief economic planner for that government. "Women and trade? How can there be such an issue?" He was not convinced.

The difficulties of convincing male managers of the United Nations system that gender did matter were more apparent when, in 1978, the FAO had decided to convene a World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, which had the unfortunate acronym WCCARD pronounced "wack card". One of my responsibilities as secretary of the task force was to represent the United Nations Secretariat at meetings of an inter-agency rural development task force that was led by FAO and met from time to time at FAO headquarters in Rome. Each of the organizations of the United Nations system that were concerned with rural development sent representatives. The inter-agency task force was expected to coordinate policies and programs related to rural development. Most of its members were, as usual, men, although the World Health Organization representative was a woman. The task force, in effect, became the inter-agency body to help coordinate preparations for the agrarian reform conference.

As representative of the United Nations Secretariat, I was expected to participate in the preparations based on instructions. The problem was that rural development was such a low priority that I could never get instructions from my department. However, as a staff member of CSDHA, I could obtain instructions from Mrs. Sipila. I received an official blessing to become a women's advocate on the ACC Task Force for Rural Development.

The FAO conference secretariat was headed by Hernan Santa Cruz, an old Chilean diplomat and retired FAO official. His deputy was another retired FAO official from India, Mr. Nehemiah, who had been chef de cabinet of the previous FAO Director-General. They both represented the old guard position that FAO had a central and almost exclusive role to lead rural development, that rural development was agriculture, that agriculture was farmers, and that farmers were men.

Within FAO, women's issues were located in the Home Economics Service, since it was considered that women were essentially farm wives. The highest-ranking woman in the FAO was at the principal officer (D-1) level and headed the Home Economics Service. While, in the post-Mexico environment, younger women professionals were beginning to press for advancement of women within the

FAO, they encountered considerable resistance. They had, however, in the context of technical assistance and research, begun to discover a curious fact: in many regions, the main farmers, especially those who grew food, were women. When they told me about their findings, I remembered some of the findings that had gone unreported in my own work on the Venezuelan agrarian reform.

The FAO leadership had decided to simplify their conference. When asked about how issues of advancement of women would be dealt with, Mr. Nehemiah said that since there had been a women's conference in Mexico City, it wasn't necessary for the FAO Conference to address those issues. The FAO leadership had a way of grating on the other agencies involved in the inter-agency preparations, and I resolved to make my mark by swimming against the tide. I presented the view that it was very important for the FAO conference to take up the issues of rural women, as a separate element.

In this, I forged alliances with the FAO women, who had organized to implement their parts of the Mexico City Plan of Action. In many ways, I became their spokesperson, since they were never part of FAO's representation on the inter-agency task force. I had a sense that there was the beginning of a network among younger professional women in the United Nations system, who were willing to use the United Nations Secretariat as a vehicle for articulating their concerns. On behalf of my task force, I transmitted comments and suggestions on the content of the plan of action being prepared for the FAO conference. Many of these came from my colleagues in the Branch; others came indirectly from my colleagues in FAO.

Back in New York, CSDHA was preparing to move to Vienna. I was convinced that relocating rural development to Vienna would fatally marginalize United Nations involvement. I worked to have the function transferred to the new Department of Technical Cooperation for Development. In this, I was assisted by the fact that the Assistant Secretary-General in that Department, who was the number two official -- the under-secretary-general was from China -- was Miss Margaret Joan Anstee of the United Kingdom, one of the few senior women in the organization who had come from UNDP, where she had been in charge of rural development as head of UNDP's policy department. I transferred to that department, together with the function, and did not move to Vienna.

At the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in the summer of 1979, Miss Anstee represented the United Nations Secretariat during the negotiation process. One of the strongest planks in the WCCARD was on rural women. The draft had picked up support from a large number of Member States, as well as the organizations of the United Nations system.

I left Rome feeling that something had been accomplished.

3. Copenhagen

The World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, held at the mid-point of the Decade should have been a moment of both triumph and renewal of effort. It was neither. The political forces in the United Nations, including the energy crisis and its implications for development, the rise of fundamentalism and the hardening of the Cold War had its effect. When the 145 Member States of the time met at Copenhagen, the times were already difficult.

An indicator of the difficulties was found in the fact that, under the heading of regional preparatory meetings, were a series of regional gatherings around the theme of women and *apartheid*, an important issue, but hardly the central theme of the conference. While not a defining event of the conference, but clearly one that showed the fragility of the issue of advancement of women in the face of external events, was the fact that Lidia Geiler, the first elected female president of Bolivia was overthrown by a military coup while she was attending the conference.

The Copenhagen Conference sought to elaborate a Programme of Action for the Second Half of the Decade. The program was alternately a minor extension of the gains made at Mexico and an addition

of political elements. In terms of substance, a harsh judgment would be that the conference broke no new ground. This would be unfair.

The program of action included a number of forward elements. It was much more elaborate on the issue of rural women, building consciously on the results of the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development held a year previously. It paid attention to sub-groups of women in more specific terms.

It paid little attention to institutional arrangements for advancement of women, except that it gave a strong role to the regional commissions. It made much more specific recommendations regarding statistics on advancement of women.

But the Conference was characterized by its fixation with political issues. After a long hiatus, the term "Zionism" recurred in the program, there were large sections on Palestinian women and women under apartheid. Of the 47 resolutions adopted along with the program for action, fully a third dealt with issues on which consensus could not be reached. There were resolutions on women in Lebanon, in Chile, in El Salvador, in Bolivia, in Western Sahara, in South Africa and in Palestine. There was a resolution on South African aggression in Angola. The credentials of one Member State, Democratic Kampuchea, were challenged and had to go to the vote. Of the 47 resolutions, many were passed by votes, some where the number of negative votes and abstentions almost balanced the positive.

In the end, an inability to reach compromises on the program of action led to a vote on the central document of the Conference. Only the section on national action, where little new ground was broken, was accepted without a vote. Many delegations questioned whether the Conference results justified the Conference.

Follow-up to Copenhagen was then entrusted to the Commission on the Status of Women and the Branch for the Advancement of Women, which had not, in the end, been responsible for the conference preparations.

4. Picking up the pieces after Copenhagen

By the time the General Assembly met in the fall of 1980 to consider the results of Copenhagen, there was a mood to swing back into a normal track. The resolution on the Conference made a pro forma endorsement of the program of action, but also requested that the Secretariat submit proposals for implementing the program for action, an open request to select the aspects that could achieve consensus. It made a number of other decisions to place the process back on track:

- It requested the Secretary-General "to consider appropriate measures to enable the Commission on the Status of Women to discharge the functions assigned to it for the implementation of the World Plan of Action". In other words, the Commission was back in the picture and there was no more threat that it would be marginalized.
- It requested him "to take immediate action to strengthen the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat at Vienna". In other words the Branch had been rehabilitated.
- It requested the establishment of a network of focal points within the organizations of the United Nations system, with a view to mainstreaming.
- And it decided "to convene in 1985, at the conclusion of the Decade, a World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women".

Several things had changed. Mrs. Sipila's days were numbered and she was about to be replaced by Leticia Ramos Shahani of the Philippines as Assistant Secretary-General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs. Mrs. Shahani had, like Mrs. Sipila, been chair of the Third Committee of the General Assembly. Unlike Mrs. Sipila she had considerable experience with the United Nations. She had been a staff member of the Status of Women Section during the Molly Bruce era. She came from a

prominent Philippine family and her brother was the commander of the Philippine army. Coming from a developing country, she could by existing blunt any accusation that the Secretariat was dominated by western feminists.

Strengthening of the Centre, in this case, meant appointing someone from a developing country as director of the Branch for the Advancement of Women. It was considered by many developing countries that a branch headed at the principal office level did not have the prestige that would be accorded to one headed by someone at the Director level. In due course, a director was found. She was Chafika Sellami-Meslem of Algeria.

Mrs. Meslem was one of the relatively few women who could be – and was – a member of the World Veterans Federation. As a teenager, she had been a member of the Algerian independence fighter against the French. She had been arrested, tortured and imprisoned. After independence, she had joined the new Algerian diplomatic service and had risen to become the Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Office at Geneva. She had headed the Algerian delegation to Mexico City, but had missed Copenhagen.

With the appointment of Mrs. Meslem, Mrs. Kubota, who had not been informed, left the United Nations to return to Japan.

The decision to hold a conference in 1985 focused the work of the Secretariat. It was a different Secretariat than had been found in New York before Mexico City. Most of the staff had not transferred to Vienna and their posts were gradually filled by new recruits, increasingly from Europe. For consistency's sake, a Liaison Office was set up in New York headed by one of the "old timers". This had the effect of providing a permanent person to work with New York based delegations that were influential in the General Assembly.

Over the period, the Branch for the Advancement of Women and the Commission on the Status of Women, which had been designated to the preparatory body for the 1985 conference, worked primarily on preparations. Direction was assured when Mrs. Shahani was designated, ex officio, as Secretary-General of the Conference. Three other events affecting the institutional structure also took place.

In 1981, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women entered into force. With it came the establishment of a treaty monitoring body, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which was to be serviced by the Branch. It was the only human rights treaty body that was not serviced by the Centre for Human Rights, as the Division for Human Rights was now called. This increased the workload of the Branch, but also gave it access to an institutional tool to promote women's human rights.

INSTRAW had become functional in 1979 and by 1981 was fully established. Headed by Dunja Pastizzi-Ferencic, an energy economist from Yugoslavia, it began its work with a series of priorities including: development of gender statistics, work on incorporation of women in planning, work on women and water. At an early stage, INSTRAW sought to ensure its independence from other United Nations organizations, especially the Branch for the Advancement of Women.

Its director sought to cut links with Vienna and strengthen them with United Nations Headquarters in New York. In a report submitted to the General Assembly in 1983, the Institute stated delicately: "As the Institute is now functioning from its headquarters in Santo Domingo, and in order to ensure the prompt execution of administrative and substantive matters, the Institute needs the continuous support provided by various departments of the United Nations Secretariat at *Headquarters* and arrangement to ensure continuous contacts with United Nations *Headquarters*."

It was decided to replace Mrs. Shahani with the Under-Secretary-General for Technical Cooperation as the representative of the Secretary-General on the INSTRAW Board. This had the effect of ensuring the INSTRAW would not cooperate with the Branch in the preparations for Nairobi.

The Voluntary Fund, in a similar vein, sought its independence from the Branch. The Fund had been set up as part of the Branch, and for years its director, Margaret Snyder, an American who had worked for many years in Africa, had sought autonomy. She had successfully resisted moving to Vienna by arguing, with the support of her Consultative Committee, that it was important to stay in New York to maintain links with the United Nations Development Programme.

After Copenhagen, she lobbied to have the Fund completely separated. First, the mandate of the Fund was extended beyond the Decade, with an implication that it would be permanent. In 1984, Mrs. Shahani finally accepted the inevitable and acceded to a full separation. The General Assembly passed a resolution “establishing the Voluntary Fund for the United Nations Decade for Women as a separate entity in autonomous association with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and renaming the fund the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)”. Henceforth UNIFEM related to advancement of women in a way similar to those of the other the organizations of the United Nations system.

5. Preparing for Nairobi

In 1983, the General Assembly accepted the offer of the Government of Kenya to hold the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women in Nairobi.

In the same resolution, the Assembly welcomed the decision of the Economic and Social Council to invite non-governmental organizations to participate in the preparations for the Conference. This reaffirmed something that had been apparent for considerable time: it was non-governmental organizations that pushed the governmental part of the United Nations to deal with women’s issues. It set the stage, as well, for the NGO Forum that became famous at Nairobi.

In fact, non-governmental organizations had been an integral part of the work of the Commission on the Status of Women since it had been founded. The Charter of the United Nations had specified a role for non-governmental organizations in the economic and social work of the Organization. This form of democracy had become carefully regulated over time. Individual NGO’s could apply for and be granted “consultative status” with the Council, which allowed them to attend meetings as observers, make statements and otherwise participate in work. To be granted status an organization had to demonstrate that it was international in scope, permanently organized and had objectives and activities that were consistent with those of the United Nations. Status was granted after a review by a committee of the Council. Some NGO’s argued that the procedure allowed governments to block the accreditation of organizations that opposed them, especially human rights organizations.

There had been NGO forums at the Mexico City and Copenhagen conferences and the NGO community began to prepare for Nairobi organizing a facilitating committee and raising funds. The NGOs negotiated directly with the Kenyan Government and with national NGOs. They designated a “convener”, a prominent woman NGO, to lead the preparations. She was Dame Nita Barrow of Barbados, who had been president of the World Council of Churches and was later Barbados’ representative to the United Nations and even later Governor-General of her country.

By the early 1980’s, a major characteristic of the women’s movement at the international level was the increasing involvement of the organizations of the United Nations system. In operative terms, most of the issues concerning women were the responsibility of various Specialized Agencies rather than the United Nations Secretariat itself. The World Health Organization in health, the International Labour Organization in employment, the Food and Agriculture Organization in rural development, UNESCO in education all had direct concerns.

These organizations had few women in leadership positions and the units dealing with advancement of women were usually small and, in some sense, embattled. Staffed by professionals who

were convinced that their organizations larger mission could not be achieved unless gender was taken into account, these units engaged in sustained efforts to press their organizations' leadership to take the issue seriously. They were often able to count on the support of government delegations in this and in many cases the governments were more progressive than the secretariats.

The agency women were organized in a network of focal points that met once a year to exchange information and develop common approaches.

Coordination had become one of the watchwords of the organization. Member States saw it as a device to increase effectiveness while reducing cost. They were convinced that there was considerable overlapping and duplication of effort among the sixteen Specialized Agencies and the many funds and programs of the United Nations itself. The Economic and Social Council had the responsibility for overseeing coordination, supported by a subsidiary body called the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC). The problem for the governments was that it was extremely difficult to determine whether coordination was taking place, since most of the issues addressed by the system crossed the sectoral boundaries that defined the individual agencies.

The Economic and Social Council, in 1984, decided to cast its eye on coordination of UN system efforts to promote advancement of women and in 1985, before the Conference, judged that more could be done. On the basis of a study done by the Secretariat which showed that there was only limited commitment to advancement of women in agency plans and programs, the Council decided to request that a system-wide medium-term plan be prepared that would help ensure that program budgets made provision for the follow-up to the Nairobi conference.

A system-wide medium-term plan for women and development

In 1980, I joined the new Office of Program Planning and Coordination. The Office had been set up in the wake of a reform process intended to strengthen the organization's ability to support development activities. One part of the new office was intended to promote better coordination by studying the state of cooperation among organizations and encouraging joint planning. I had always been amused by bureaucratic organizational titles and when I transferred to the Joint Planning Section, I remember asking whether its function was to organize the construction and distribution of low-life taverns, or to organize the assembly and distribution of cannabis cigarettes.

Its real function was to conduct studies that would show, for different areas, how well organizations of the United Nations system worked together. We did this by examining the plans and program budgets of the organizations to see the activities on which they spent their money and by looking at inter-agency coordination arrangements.

Mostly this was a useless effort, because most questions were resolved by the natural sectoral division of labor on which the system was built. However, in one case, there was utility.

The Section had been asked in 1984 to prepare a study of how well advancement of women had been reflected in the medium-term plans of the organizations. This was part of the preparations for the Nairobi Conference. One of my colleagues, Sulafa Al-Bassam from Saudi Arabia, a sociologist who had originally joined the Social Development Division and who had eventually turned up in the Joint Planning Section did the analysis. After her review, she had concluded that commitment was, as I expressed it to colleagues "a mile wide and an inch deep." That is, in preparation for Nairobi, most agencies were giving lip service to advancement of women, but this was not being built into program structures and it could be expected that one the conference was over, the commitment would evaporate rapidly. We reported this fact and made a benign suggestion that something should be done about it.

The Economic and Social Council, which usually ignored our studies, surprised us by passing a resolution in May 1985 decrying the lack of commitment and requesting the preparation of a system-wide medium-term plan.

Normally, anything having to do with women was automatically referred to the Branch for the Advancement of Women in Vienna, but in this case we decided to take the responsibility ourselves. The Branch did not have a good reputation in New York for its ability to work cooperatively with others and was considered to be isolated in Vienna.

I decided to take charge of the preparation of the first draft of the plan myself. To prepare myself, I had to become interested in what was happening in the Nairobi Conference.

The preparations for the Nairobi Conference continued. The Governments and the Secretariat were committed to avoiding the kinds of political problems that had afflicted Copenhagen. One of the first decisions made was that the Commission as preparatory body would operate on the basis of consensus. This meant that any decision required that all members were willing to go along; there would be no votes.

The preparations for Nairobi involved a number of parallel efforts. One was to convene regional preparatory meetings. These were seen as a means of ensuring that regional priorities could be expressed in advance of the Conference. As a result, meetings were organized in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia and the Pacific. The respective regional economic commissions were responsible for organizing them. No meeting was organized in Western Asia and, since there was no women's program in the Economic Commission for Europe, the meeting for that region had to be organized by the Branch for the Advancement of Women in Vienna.

A second effort was to prepare an assessment of what had been achieved during the Decade. For this national reports had been requested and to prepare them, the Branch had designed a sixty-page questionnaire to be filled out. The review and appraisal report was expected to be the basis for recommendations about strategies to be followed.

The United Nations Secretariat had developed a standard report. A conference would be held. A program of action would be adopted. The Secretary-General would be asked at some point to report on what was achieved in implementing the action. The substantive office would send out a questionnaire. A number of states and UN organizations would reply. The replies would be synthesized by the Secretariat and a report would be presented and ignored.

The same pattern was being followed for Nairobi by the Branch.

A third effort was to prepare a world survey on the role of women in development. Advancement of women had been considered for almost forty years a social issue, dealt with by the Third Committee of the General Assembly. However, women activists knew that the main issues of development, such as structural adjustment, debt, trade, population and development assistance were dealt with in the Second (Economic) Committee of the General Assembly.

After considerable difficulty, since there were few women delegates in the Second Committee, a resolution was passed asking the Secretary-General to prepare a report that would deal with the economic aspects of women in development. This document was intended to present an accurate, theoretically sound picture of how women functioned in the economy. Because it was a women's issue, the report was assigned to the Branch for preparation. It was one of the first economic studies that the Branch had been expected to prepare.

At that point, there was little in the way of agreed text on women's economic contribution. The Branch began to have problems preparing the study and, in the end, only a first draft was available for Nairobi.

The fourth effort was to prepare the draft final document from Nairobi. It is usually for these documents for a first draft to be prepared by the Secretariat, to form a basis of discussion in successive preparatory committee meetings. An effort is also made to ensure consistency with other UN documents

both in terms of content and style. The Branch for the Advancement of Women was part of the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs located in Vienna, but part of a department located in New York.

A process began where drafts originating in Vienna were reviewed and often re-written in New York. Each had its own perspective. The Vienna office was close to the Commission on the Status of Women, which met there, while the New York office was close to the Third Committee, where delegates tended to come from permanent missions. The conflict of ideas could have been enriching, but in fact was negative.

The Branch had been reconstituted in Vienna with few of its former New York staff and had gradually re-staffed with new people. Its geographical makeup had changed, as had its perspective. It was more European in orientation than North American. The senior managers of the Centre and the Branch were all from developing countries.

As a result, there were conflicts about the draft texts to be proposed for Nairobi, within the Centre and between New York and Vienna.

Coupled with the continuing conflicts among delegations about political and economic issues, the run-up to Nairobi was highly charged.

Chapter Three. Nairobi

The Nairobi Conference was preceded and accompanied by a forum of non-governmental organizations. Some 13,000 NGO delegates participated in events located at the campus of the University of Kenya, at least 7000 of them from overseas. It was one of the largest turnouts of NGOs in the history of United Nations conferences. The delegates constituted the vanguard of thinking about women's issues, far ahead of those in government delegations.

The Nairobi Conference itself brought a large number of women political leaders, first ladies and UN agency heads to make plenary statements. The negotiations were conducted in two main committees, as at Copenhagen, with the draft texts of the Strategies, as well as resolutions, divided between them.

The negotiations were difficult. The text coming from the preparatory committee was uneven. There were sticking points on the usual issues, Palestinian women, apartheid, structural adjustment. Debates were long and heated, with the Committees meeting late into the night.

Among the women delegates, there was a commitment to adopt the Strategies by consensus and by the last day, most issues had been settled through drafting changes that papered over differences.

On the last night the main remaining issues related to Palestine and to apartheid. The United States pursued a consistent policy in all forums, based on the premise that if they yielded on issues in one meeting they would be forced to yield in others. This consistency had made compromise difficult.

At Nairobi, the United States delegation was headed by Maureen Reagan, the oldest daughter of the American president. She had a channel that would allow her to reach agreements that would be difficult for an ordinary diplomat to achieve.

It is said that the last session, meeting late into the night of the last day of the conference, was dramatic. At one point, as was customary, the United States seat had been occupied by Alan Keyes, the Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations, a Republican conservative of African-American descent. He articulated the United States position that apartheid was a political issue that should not be dealt with in a women's conference. Next to the United States in the alphabetic order of the hall was the United Republic of Tanzania, whose delegation was headed by Gertrude Mongella, a cabinet minister and designated spokesperson for the African group at the Conference.

At one point, Mrs. Mongella, pretending that her microphone did not work, reached across to use that of the United States. She made a short, powerful speech in which she asked how someone of African descent, at a meeting taking place on the African continent, could possibly support anything having to do with apartheid.

In the end, the United States found language on which they could compromise and other points which they could accept by entering a reservation or explanatory statement. The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000 were adopted by consensus.

The miracle of Nairobi was that consensus was achieved at all, but despite all prognostication, women's concern for their own issues forced the compromises necessary to adopt the Strategies. It was the first world conference of the 1980's to adopt a final text by consensus.

An outside observer¹ looking at the text coldly would find it wordy, repetitive, poorly organized, and often written in a bureaucratic form of "un-ese" whose meaning was impenetrable. Sections that were forthright and clear would be followed by explanatory paragraphs that were opaque. It was not a document

¹ I was not present at Nairobi or in the negotiation process previous to the Conference. Colleagues who were present gave me some of the flavor. Personalities seemed to be more important than ideas.

that could be used to inspire action. I once asked a meeting of women activists whether they had read the Strategies. Only one had examined it and she said, “it was not an easy read.”

With a ten-year backward perspective, it is possible to see that the Strategies largely avoided most of the issues that became the centerpieces of the Beijing Platform. It was these issues around which the conceptual revolution occurred: women in power and politics, women in the economy, violence against women, reproductive rights, the special needs and concerns of groups of women and who is responsible for advancement of women.

1. Women in politics

The issue of women’s rights to participate in politics was one of the first that had been addressed by the United Nations. An international convention adopted in 1951 guaranteed women’s equal right to vote and hold public office. However, at the time of Nairobi, while many women voted, relatively few held public office. Absent women from political decision-making, the normative and economic power of the State would not be mobilized for the advancement of women.

The Nairobi Strategies had a section on equality in political participation and decision-making, but its prescriptions, like many in the Strategies, reads in retrospect as very passive. It states “Governments and political parties should intensify efforts to stimulate and ensure equality of participation by women in all national and local legislative bodies and to achieve equity in the appointment, election and promotion of women to high posts in executive, legislative and judiciary branches in these bodies. ...” (para. 86).

While the target of equality is expressed, it is not time bound, and the methods outlined (devoting “special attention”, “legislative and administrative measures”, “publicizing the existence of posts”, providing career facilities for spouses in foreign services, promoting awareness of women’s rights, asking political parties to “make deliberate efforts” to increase participation, and establish institutional arrangements to facilitate participation) are often either imprecise or too-narrowly focused.

2. Women in the economy

The focus of the Nairobi Strategies in terms of women in the economy was on employment, mostly in the formal sector and mostly concerned with ensuring equal access. The section on food, water and agriculture, however, building on work during the decade set out a thorough, integrated approach to ensuring women’s access of productive resources. This was not matched in other economic sectors, defined as industry and trade.

The recognition of women’s key productive role in rural areas was not matched by precision in other sectors and the Strategies did not emphasize women’s role in the informal sector, in entrepreneurship and in unremunerated economic activities.

3. Violence against women

Considering its importance in the Beijing document, it seems strange that the Nairobi Strategies give the issue of violence against women only a secondary place. The issue itself emerged only slowly over the course of the United Nations Decade. In Mexico City, it appeared in the context of a resolution dealing with “intra-family conflict”, in Copenhagen in a resolution on battered women. By Nairobi there was the beginning of a recognition of the universality and importance of the problem. The Strategies state: “Violence against women exists in various forms in everyday life in all societies. ...” The measures, however, are vague: assistance to victims, legal measures, national machinery and some preventive measures, unspecified, are suggested.

In fact, the issue was more important for its placement. As part of the compromises necessary for consensus, the issue of violence against women was placed under the rubric of “peace” together with many of the political issues of the day. This helped move the “peace” section to an extent out of the Cold War.

The issue was also reflected in the section on special groups of women, where there were sub-sections on abused women and women victims of trafficking and involuntary prostitution.

Reproductive rights

The issue of women's right to control their own fertility was one of the controversies at Nairobi that was neither East-West nor North-South. The issue, however, turned on access of family planning and was contained in the health sub-section of the development section, and was not mentioned in the equality section. The Strategies stated: "The *ability* [emphasis added] of women to control their own fertility forms an important basis of the enjoyment of other rights." Reference is made to the agreements at the International Conference on Population, 1984, that "all couples and individuals have the basic human right to decide freely and informedly the number and spacing of their children." The formulation is also found in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

The Holy See delegation fought the family planning paragraphs and reserved on the issue. However, the agreed text did not extend past agreements already reached and what was meant by the relationship between enjoyment of reproductive rights and other rights was not carefully drawn.

4. Groups of women

It would be clear to everyone but the most abstract that all women are not alike. Women who have particular circumstances are prepared to argue for priority to be given to those needs. The difficulty has been to express this in agreed language without, in the process, breaking the unity of the women's movement. The diversity issue was addressed at Nairobi through a special section in the Strategies entitled "Areas of Specific Concern", identifying fourteen groups of women. The texts were uneven, depending it would seem, on the ability of various groups of women to reach delegations, and the fourteen groups were in no way of equal importance, either in numbers or in significance.

5. Who is responsible?

The most difficult aspect of the Strategies was the tone. Written in passive voice, it implied that various actors should take measures to overcome obstacles. As an inter-governmental document, most of the measures should, in principle, be taken by Governments. However, since most governments were run by men, in effect the Strategies asked men to do the right thing by their women, a kind of Victorian approach that essentially left no-one really responsible for implementing the Strategies and made monitoring extremely difficult, as was soon learned.

With the adoption of the Strategies, with the attendant battles, it was as though the march had to stop, circle the wagons, and rest.