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*tragedy to spoil this unique opportunity by confusing the wish and the facts. 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 (...)"*²

On 21 June 1946, the Sub-Commission formally became the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), a full-fledged Commission dedicated to ensuring women's equality and to promoting women's rights. Its mandate was to "prepare recommendations and reports to the Economic and Social Council on promoting women's rights in political, economic, civil, social and educational fields" and to make recommendations "on urgent problems requiring immediate attention in the field of women's rights."³ Shortly thereafter, the Section on the Status of Women of the United Nations Secretariat—which would become the Division for the Advancement of Women in 1978—was established in the Human Rights Division of the United Nations to provide secretariat functions.

1947-1962: Securing the Legal Foundations of Gender Equality

First session: The Commission meets at Lake Success

The Commission on the Status of Women first met at Lake Success, New York, in February 1947. At that session, all of the 15 government representatives were women – giving the Commission the unique character it was going to maintain throughout its history

allowed many NGOs' contributions to be incorporated in its agreed conclusions and UN resolutions.

15 original members of the Commission on the Status of Women

Jessie Mary Grey Street, Australia
Evdokia Uralova, Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic
Way Sung New, People's Republic of China
Graciela Morales F. de Echeverria, Costa Rica
Bodil Begtrup, Denmark
Marie Helene Lefauchaux, France
Sara Basterrechea Ramirez, Guatemala
Shareefah Hamid Ali, India
Amalia C de Castillo Ledon, Mexico
Alice Kandalf Cosma, Syria
Mihri Pektas, Turkey
Elizavieta Alekseevna Popova, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
Mary Sutherland, United Kingdom
Dorothy Kenyon, USA
Isabel de Urdaneta, Venezuela

From the beginning the Commission members also built close working relationships with the international human rights treaty bodies, the Commission on Human Rights, the Social Commission and the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, and specialized agencies such as UNESCO and UNICEF.

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Providing women universal access to political rights

The Commission made women's political rights a high priority in the early years of its work. In 1945, only 25 of the original 51 United Nations Member States allowed women equal voting rights with men. In his 1950 report to the Commission on discrimination against women in the field of political rights, the Secretary General noted that in 22 countries women still did not have equal rights to vote or hold political office, and that in some countries where women held such rights, these were not put into practice.¹⁰ After an extensive debate, the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, drafted by the Commission, was adopted by the General Assembly on 20 December 1952.¹¹ It was the first international law instrument to recognize and protect the political rights of women everywhere by spelling out that women, on an equal basis with men, were entitled to vote in any election, run for election to any office, and hold any public office or exercise any public function under national law.

Removing discrimination in marriage

Throughout the 1950's the Commission turned its attention on the issue of discrimination in marriage. UN reports revealed that discrimination against women was frequently due to differences between national laws on family residence, marriage and divorce. The Commission embraced this problem by drafting the Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (adopted on 29 January 1957),¹² followed by the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (adopted on 7 November 1962),¹³ and the Recommendation on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (adopted on 1 November 1965).¹⁴ Together these measures represent the first international agreements on women's rights in relation to marriage that were adopted by the UN.

Other areas of the Commission's work

¹⁰ E/CN.6/131, 15 March 1950.

¹¹ General Assembly resolution 640(VII).

¹² General Assembly resolution 1040 (XI).

¹³ General Assembly resolution 1763 A (XVII).

¹⁴ General Assembly resolution 2018 (XX).

During the same period, the Commission worked with UNESCO to develop programmes and advocate for increasing women's literacy and equality in access to education. It also undertook work on women's economic rights: a study launched in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO) led to the 1951 Convention on Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value, which enshrined the principle of equal pay for work of equal value.¹⁵

In the early 1950s, the Commission also began focusing on the issue of traditional practices harmful to women and girls. Thanks to the Commission's efforts, resolutions were adopted by the ECOSOC in 1952 and the General Assembly in 1954 urging Member States to take measures to abolish practices that violated the physical integrity and human rights of women. However, traditional practices remained a sensitive issue and it would not be until the mid-1980s that female genital mutilation/cutting, for instance, would be recognized as a form of violence against women.¹⁶

1963-1975: Promoting the Participation of Women in Development

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of profound change in the United Nations, whose membership had begun to expand dramatically with the emergence of newly independent nations. The Organization began widening its focus to include the concerns of developing nations. The 1960s and early 1970s also saw the emergence in many parts of the world of a greater awareness of discrimination against women, and a rise in the number of organizations committed to combating it. The burgeoning international women's movement influenced the approaches to women and development in the UN. The Commission's efforts increasingly focused on the role of women in development, both as beneficiaries and as agents of change.¹⁷

¹⁵ Adopted on 29 June 1951 by the General Conference of the International Labour Organisation at its thirty-fourth session.

¹⁶ *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women, op.cit.*, p. 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

As evidence began to accumulate in the 1960s that women were disproportionately affected by poverty, the work of the Commission centered on women's needs in community and rural development, agricultural work, family planning and the impact of scientific and technological advances.¹⁸ The Commission encouraged the UN to expand its technical assistance to further the advancement of women, especially in developing countries.¹⁹ In the wake of Ester Boserup's influential study *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970), and the interest for economic issues it encouraged throughout the feminist movement, the Commission brought greater attention to the question of women's economic participation, and cultural and social factors affecting women's participation in development.²⁰ In 1968, long-term Commission member Helvi Sipilä, a representative from Finland, was nominated as special rapporteur for the Status of Women and Family Planning Project and in this capacity launched numerous studies on the subject.²¹ The Commission also appointed a Special Rapporteur to report on ways to eliminate stereotypes in the mass media portrayal and coverage of women and girl child issues.

Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

In an effort to consolidate standards on women's rights that had been developed since 1945, the General Assembly requested the Commission in 1963 to draft a Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.²² The Assembly noted that, while there had been measurable progress in achieving equal rights, "in various fields there still remains, in fact if not in law, considerable discrimination against women."²³ The drafting process was supported from the beginning by women's rights activists working both within and outside the UN system. Drafting of the declaration by a committee, selected from within the Commission, began in 1965. On 7 November 1967, the Declaration on

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁹ See E/RES/884 E, 16 July 1962, and A/RES/17777, 7 December 1962.

²⁰ Devaki JAIN. *Women, Development and the UN*, op.cit., p. 52.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²² *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women*, op.cit., p. 29.

²³ A/RES/1921 (XVIII).

the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was ultimately adopted by the General Assembly.

General Assembly. The World Conference of the International Women's Year was subsequently held in Mexico City in 1975. 133 Governments participated in the conference, while for the first time 6000 representatives of NGOs attended a parallel forum, the International Women's Year tribune. The conference defined a World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Women's Year, which offered a comprehensive set of guidelines for the advancement of women up until 1985.²⁸ With the conclusion of the conference in 1975, a long sought-after process of change had been set in motion and the Commission was now in a

prepared by working groups within the Commission during 1976. Extensive deliberations continued from 1977 to 1979, through a working group of the Third Committee³² of the General Assembly.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was finally adopted by the General Assembly in 1979 by a vote of 130 Member States

Second World Conference during the United Nations Decade for Women

In July 1980, 145 Member States gathered for the mid-decade World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women organized in Copenhagen. In addition to reaffirming the importance of the CEDAW, the conference had the objective to review progress in implementing the goals of the World Conference of the International Women's Year and to update its Plan of Action. It focused on three areas of urgent concern for women: employment, health and education.³⁴ These issues came to the forefront, based on the mutual understanding that the broad goals of equality, development and peace enumerated at the World Conference of the International Women's Year could not be achieved unless they were refined into sector-specific, highly focused objectives for women.³⁵ The 1980 Programme of Action called for stronger national measures to ensure women's ownership and control of property, as well as improvements in women's rights to inheritance, child custody and loss of nationality. Over 8,000 participants from 187 countries attended the NGO Forum to discuss the major themes of the conference and network actively.

Strengthening the Commission on the Status of Women

Through the Decade for Women, United Nations efforts to advance the status of women expanded and increasingly mainstreamed other development programmes.³⁶ By 1980, the Commission was no longer the only entity working on women's issues in the UN. The reporting and implementation mechanisms established for the Decade had been diffused throughout the UN regional commissions, specialized agencies and funds. New organizations dedicated to women had been established, such as the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW).³⁷

³⁴ A/RES/33/185, 29 January 1979.

³⁵ *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women, op.cit.*, p. 44.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁷ In 1975, the General Assembly recommended the creation of the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW). In 1984, the General Assembly transformed the Voluntary Fund for the United Nations Decade of the United Nations Development Programme into a permanent, autonomous body: the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

By the end of two weeks of complex negotiations, Governments agreed to adopt by consensus the 372-paragraph Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women—a blueprint for the future of women to the end of the century, which outlined a series of measures for implementing gender equality at the national level and for promoting women’s participation in peace efforts.⁴¹

1986-1995: Putting Women on the Global Agenda

In 1987, the Commission began to meet annually instead of biennially. It took the lead in coordinating and promoting the UN system’s work on economic and social issues for women’s empowerment when the General Assembly mandated it to monitor the global implementation of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women.⁴² As a result, the Commission’s efforts shifted to promote women’s equality as a cross-cutting theme in economic development, human rights, political, cultural as well as social policy issues. Its approach was now to deal with women’s issues as part of the mainstream rather than as a separate issue.⁴³

Exposing violence against women and girls 1995 World Bank *Flowchart* ITD -0.13 -0.0s75 0 ear T.2400.0591 c 3.898 Tw

The Declaration for the Elimination of Violence against Women was adopted by the General Assembly on 20 December 1993. During this period, the Commission and the CEDAW Committee started examining the possibility of introducing the right of petition through the preparation of an Optional Protocol to CEDAW.

In March 1994, a Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences was appointed, with a mandate to investigate and report on all aspects of violence against women. The rapporteur is an independent expert reporting to the Commission on Human Rights, and liaising with the Commission, the CEDAW Committee and other relevant UN bodies. The Special Rapporteur contributed to reinforcing the links between the Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission on Human Rights.

The 1990s international development conferences

During the 1990s, a series of global conferences and summit meetings on critical aspects of development was held as part of an UN-led drive to establish an integrated global agenda for development. Of particular interest to gender equality and the empowerment of women were the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro), the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna), the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo), the 1995 Social Development Summit, the 1996 Habitat II Conference on Human Settlements and the 1996 World Food Summit. With pressure from women's groups, these conferences and summits of the 1990s further raised awareness around the world and placed gender equality issues at the centre of international discourse on policy-making related to environment, population, reproductive health, human rights, food security, social development and human settlements.

1995: The Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing

One of the greatest achievements of the Commission on the Status of Women was the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, which significantly advanced the global agenda for women's human rights and gender equality. The

Commission and its Secretariat led the preparatory process. It coordinated the negotiations on the draft Platform for Action in a very participatory and

Review and appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action: “Beijing +5”

The General Assembly, on the recommendation of the Commission on the Status of Women, decided to hold a twenty-third special session in 2000 to conduct a five-year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and considering future actions and initiatives.

The Commission on the Status of Women, acting as the Preparatory Commission, negotiated a draft political declaration and outcome document for adoption at the special session. The UN regional commissions convened regional preparatory meetings to ensure a regional perspective on implementation and further actions and initiatives.

The special session, “Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development, and Peace for the Twenty-first Century”, took place in New York at UN Headquarters from 5 to 9 June 2000. Member States reached consensus on a Political Declaration and on further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (i.e. the “outcome document”). Approximately 5,000 persons participated in the event, including 2,300 representatives of governments, and over 2,000 persons representing 1,036 non-governmental organizations. The NGO Committee and the New York Host Committee organized numerous panels and other events at the UN (over 60 panels and workshops) and in New York City on the critical areas of concern. It was the largest special session of the General Assembly ever held at the UN headquarters in New York.

The Commission's work now focuses on the implementation of both the Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. In 2005, a ten-year review and appraisal of the Beijing Platform was organized in the framework of the 49th session of the Commission. The session gathered over 1,800 government representatives, 2,720 NGO representatives, and hundreds of participants from UN agencies.

The Declaration adopted by the Commission at its 49th session reaffirmed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly and emphasized that the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is essential to achieving the

on UN member States to support the elaboration of the Optional Protocol, the Commission established an open-ended working group on the Optional Protocol in 1996, which discussed drafts over a period of four years. In a landmark decision for women, the General Assembly, acting without a vote, adopted on 6 October 1999 a 21-article Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. By ratifying the Optional Protocol, a State recognizes the competence of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to receive and consider complaints from individuals or groups within its jurisdiction. The Optional Protocol entered into force on 22 December 2000, following the ratification of the tenth State party to the Convention.⁴⁸

Gender Mainstreaming

Since 1995, the Commission on the Status of Women has also developed its catalytic role in support of gender mainstreaming. The schedule for consideration by the Commission of the 12 critical areas of concern of the Platform for Action took into account follow-up reviews of other international development conferences, which increased the potential for gender mainstreaming in these processes. The Commission has also made available the outcome of its work to other functional commissions—such as the Commission on Sustainable Development in 1997 and the Commission on Human Rights in 1998. For the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa, the Commission forwarded its agreed conclusions on environmental management and the mitigation of natural disasters. In 2003, it provided its agreed conclusions on participation in and access of women to the media, and information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women to the World Summit on the Information Society, held in Geneva.⁴⁹

Since 1975 instrument 383 h n o l o g i T D - 0 . 1 0 0 2 T c

on Women and Peace and Security. In its 2004 agreed conclusions, the Commission addressed women's equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution and in post-conflict peace-building.

Conclusion

Throughout its sixty years of existence and its fifty sessions, the Commission on the Status of Women has consistently promoted the advancement of women. It has been instrumental in expanding the recognition of women's rights, in documenting the reality of women's lives throughout the world, in shaping global policies on gender equality and empowerment of women and in ensuring that the work of the UN in all areas incorporates a gender perspective. It continues to play a critical role by bringing together Governments, UN entities, NGOs, and other international and regional organizations to promote women's rights and advance gender equality.