

# Short History of the Commission on the Status of Women<sup>1</sup>

## 1946: Birth of the Commission on Status of Women

United Nations commitments to the advancement of women began with the signing of the UN Charter in San Francisco in 1945. Of the 160 signatories, only four were women - Minerva Bernardino (Dominican Republic), Virginia Gildersleeve (United States), Bertha Lutz (Brazil) and Wu Yi-Fang (China) – but they succeeded in inscribing women’s rights in the founding document of the United Nations, which reaffirms in its preamble “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of Nations large and small”.

During the inaugural meetings of the UN General Assembly in London in February 1946, Eleanor Roosevelt, a United States delegate, read an open letter addressed to “the women of the world”:

*“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.”*

A few days later, a Sub-commission dedicated to the Status of Women was established under the Commission on Human Rights. Many women delegates and representatives of non-governmental organizations believed nevertheless that a separate body specifically dedicated to women’s issues was necessary. The first Chairperson of the Sub-Commission, Bodil Begtrup (Denmark), also requested the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in May 1946 for a change to full commission status:

*“Women’s 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. And it would be, in the opinion of this Sub-Commission of experts in this field, a*

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<sup>1</sup> This background note is based on the United Nations Blue Book Series on *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women, 1945-1996* and the United Nations CD-Rom *Women Go Global*, 2000.

*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 (...)*<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup> 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 by gathering a majority of women delegates.

From its inception, the Commission also forged a close relationship with non-governmental organizations. Several international women's organizations addressed the Commission at the first session, and from then on, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with ECOSOC were invited to participate as observers. In the 1950's, the average number of NGOs attending the Commission's sessions rose to 30-50. The openness of the Commission to civil society has continued up to the present time, and has

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<sup>2</sup> E/PV.4, 28 May 1946.

<sup>3</sup> ECOSOC Resolution establishing the Commission on the Status of Women. E/RES/2/11, 21 June 1946.

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. The chairperson of the Commission was invited to attend the sessions of the Commission on Human Rights devoted to finalizing the draft international bill of human rights and copies of preliminary drafts of the international bill were circulated among members of the Commission.<sup>4</sup>

During its first session, the Commission declared as one of its guiding principles:

*“to raise the status of women, irrespective of nationality, race, language or religion, to equality with men in all fields of human enterprise, and to eliminate all discrimination against women in the provisions of statutory law, in legal maxims or rules, or in interpretation of customary law”.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> E/281/Rev.1, 25 February 1947.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

### ***Drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights***

During its first meeting, Commission members affirmed that the Commission should have a voice in upcoming discussions on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Contributing to the drafting of the international bill of rights became one of the first tasks of the Commission. In revising the articles sent to them for comments, Commission members inserted gender-sensitive language—arguing against references to “men” as a synonym for humanity and phrases like “men are brothers.”<sup>6</sup> They encountered resistance from members of the Commission on Human Rights, but succeeded in introducing new, more inclusive language<sup>7</sup>—a truly ground-breaking achievement when put in a historical perspective.

### ***The Commission focuses on women’s rights***

During the period 1946-1962, the Commission focused its attention on promoting women's rights and equality by setting standards and formulating international conventions aiming at changing discriminatory legislation and fostering global awareness of women’s issues. However, the codification of the legal rights of women needed to be supported by data and analysis of the extent to which discrimination against women existed, not only in law but also in practice. The Commission thus embarked on a vast research and polling effort to assess the status of women worldwide.<sup>8</sup> Several questionnaires and studies were launched in order to collect information on the legal status of women, their access to education, their work opportunities and their civil rights. Member States provided the Commission with statistics, while non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other UN agencies provided additional information, especially of a more qualitative nature. These fact-finding efforts produced a detailed, country-by-country picture of the political and legal status of women, which over time became the basis for drafting human right instruments.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women, op.cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Devaki JAIN. *Women, Development and the UN: A Sixty-year Quest for Equality and Justice*, Bloomington, Indiana Press University, 2005, p. 19-20.

<sup>8</sup> *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women, op.cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

### ***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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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),<sup>12</sup> followed by the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (adopted on 7 November 1962),<sup>13</sup> and the Recommendation on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (adopted on 1 November 1965).<sup>14</sup> 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***

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<sup>10</sup> E/CN.6/131, 15 March 1950.

<sup>11</sup> General Assembly resolution 640(VII).

<sup>12</sup> General Assembly resolution 1040 (XI).

<sup>13</sup> General Assembly resolution 1763 A (XVII).

<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

### **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.<sup>17</sup>

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

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

<sup>17</sup> *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.<sup>18</sup> The Commission encouraged the UN to expand its technical assistance to further the advancement of women, especially in developing countries.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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."<sup>23</sup> 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

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

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

<sup>20</sup> Devaki JAIN. *Women, Development and the UN*, op.cit., p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

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

<sup>23</sup> A/RES/1921 (XVIII).

the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was ultimately adopted by the General Assembly.<sup>24</sup>

While the Declaration was an important step in securing the legal foundation of women's equality, its impact on the ground was more limited: the reporting procedures for the Declaration's implementation were voluntary, and the level of response from Governments was low. The need for a legally binding Convention that defined women's rights—the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which was to be ultimately adopted in 1979—largely grew out of the perception that attempts to implement the Declaration had been limited.<sup>25</sup>

### ***1975: the International Women's Year***

In 1972, to mark its 25th Anniversary, the Commission recommended that 1975 be designated International Women's Year<sup>26</sup>—an idea introduced by Romania on behalf of the Women's International Democratic Federation. Its observance was intended to remind the international community that discrimination against women, entrenched in law and deeply rooted cultural beliefs, was a persistent problem in much of the world. It would also encourage Governments, NGOs and individuals to increase their efforts to promote equality between men and women and to enhance their recognition of women's contributions to development. The General Assembly endorsed the Commission's recommendation on International Women's Year and added a third theme to those of equality and development proposed by the Commission—the recognition of women's increasing contribution to the strengthening of world peace—thereby setting a three-tier agenda for the advancement of women.<sup>27</sup>

### ***First World Conference during the International Women's Year***

The Commission on the Status of Women called for the organization of an international conference to coincide with the International Women's Year, a request approved by the

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<sup>24</sup> A/RES/2263 (XXII).

<sup>25</sup> *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women, op.cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> A/RES/3010, 18 December 1972.



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 tribunal. 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.<sup>28</sup> 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 position to help sustain its momentum, while continuing to assess progress towards achieving equal rights for women in all fields.<sup>29</sup>

### **1976-1985: The Commission on the Status of Women and the United Nations Decade for Women**

In the follow-up to a recommendation from the World Conference of the International Women's Year, the UN declared 1976-1985 the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace.<sup>30</sup> The Decade contributed to bringing legitimacy to the international women's movement, and moved women's issues forward on the global agenda. Over the course of the decade, the belief that development served to advance women shifted to a new recognition that development was not possible without women.<sup>31</sup>

#### ***From the Declaration to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)***

The drafting of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was a major task for the Commission during the Decade. The drafting of CEDAW had been mandated by the Plan of Action adopted at the Mexico City Conference, which called for a convention on the elimination of discrimination against women, with effective implementation procedures. The text of the Convention was

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<sup>28</sup> *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women, op.cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> A/RES/3520, 15 December 1975.

<sup>31</sup> *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women, op.cit.*, p. 37.

prepared by working groups within the Commission during 1976. Extensive deliberations continued from 1977 to 1979, through a working group of the Third Committee<sup>32</sup> 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, with 10 abstentions. It entered into force on 3 September 1981, just 30 days after the twentieth state had ratified it — faster than any previous human rights convention.

The Convention was the first international instrument to define discrimination against women, as follows: *“any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field”*. (art. 1)

The 30 articles brought together in a comprehensive and legally binding form, internationally accepted principles on the rights of women. It committed Governments to take: *“all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on the basis of equality with men”*. (art. 3)

This international women’s bills of rights—as it is often described—has also proven throughout its 25 years of existence to be a living instrument. Thanks to the “general recommendations” issued by its expert Committee, the Convention has been able to incorporate new themes and issues of concern, such as violence against women, HIV/AIDS or disabled women.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The Third Committee considers social, humanitarian and cultural issues.

<sup>33</sup> CEDAW General recommendations n°12, 15 and 18.

### ***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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> A/RES/33/185, 29 January 1979.

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

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>37</sup> 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).

From 1970 to 1986, the Commission only met biannually. It had not been designated as the preparatory body for the World Conference of the International Women's Year and the World Conference on the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace. At that time, the Commission also had little inputs over development cooperation even though it had become the focus of United Nations' support for women. Some States even proposed the abolition of the Commission in 1980, and argued for transferring its functions to ECOSOC.<sup>38</sup> However, the World Conference on the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace held in 1980 in Copenhagen recommended that the Commission be strengthened<sup>39</sup> and given full responsibility for the preparation of the end-of-the-decade conference, the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the UN Decade for Women.<sup>40</sup>

### ***1985: World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the UN Decade for Women***

The Commission undertook the necessary preparatory work. Background documents included the results of a questionnaire completed by 121 governments reviewing the position of women in their countries. The first World Survey on the Role of Women in Development, with a focus on women's economic roles, was prepared by the Division for the Advancement of Women and served as a background report for the conference.

The World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace opened in Nairobi in 1985, with a mandate to establish concrete measures to overcome the obstacles to achieving the Decade's goals. Participants in the conference included 1,900 delegations from 157 Member States, representatives of the UN Secretariat, regional commissions, 8 specialized agencies, 17 intergovernmental organizations, 4 national liberation movements and 163 NGOs. The parallel NGO Forum 1985 that was held at the University of Nairobi attracted around 12,000 participants from all over the world, with many African, and in particular Kenyan, women in attendance.

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<sup>38</sup> *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women, op.cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>39</sup> Devaki JAIN. *Women, Development and the UN, op.cit.*, p. 132.

<sup>40</sup> A/RES/37/60, 3 December 1982.

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.<sup>41</sup>

### **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.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup>

#### ***Exposing violence against women as a public matter***

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Commission, the CEDAW Committee and eventually the Commission on Human Rights brought the issue of violence against women—which so far had been considered as a private matter, rather than as a public or a human rights issue requiring government or international action—to the forefront of the international agenda. This was encouraged by an active NGO movement that saw this issue as a major organizing tool for the women’s movement. The Commission undertook the drafting of the Declaration for the Elimination of Violence against Women in the early 1990s.

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<sup>41</sup> A/CONF.116/28/Rev.1, 1986.

<sup>42</sup> E/RES/1987/24, 26 May 1987.

<sup>43</sup> *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women, op.cit.*, p. 52.

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 comprehensive manner, including five regional preparatory meetings in 1994 as well as several NGO meetings. 170 country reports were submitted to the Commission, which served as a basis for the recommendations made in the Platform for Action. The preparatory process however, revealed diverging views which made consensus difficult. The delegates at the Conference finally agreed on a consensus document that greatly enhanced women's rights and set new benchmarks for the advancement of women and the achievement of gender equality.<sup>44</sup> The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, adopted unanimously by 189 countries, built on political agreements reached at the three previous global conferences on women and consolidated five decades of legal advances aimed at securing the equality of women with men in law and in practice.

The intergovernmental meeting in Beijing and the related NGO Forum in Huairou were the largest gatherings of government, NGO, and media representatives ever held for a UN conference. Participants at the intergovernmental conference numbered 6,000 delegates from 189 governments; more than 4,000 accredited NGO representatives, and about 4,000 journalists and media representatives. The 1995 conference showed that women had become even more organized globally than in the 1980s. The international women's movement had developed a strategic approach to influencing the international agenda.

### **1996-2006: Consolidating the advancement of women**

#### ***The Commission on the Status of Women reviews its methods of work***

As the preparatory body for the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the Commission was mandated by the General Assembly to play a central role in monitoring, within the UN system, the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and advise the Economic and Social Council. Multi-year

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

programmes of work for the Commission were decided for 1997-2001 and 2002-2006,<sup>45</sup> under which the Commission reviewed each of the 12 critical areas of concern, making recommendations on concrete measures to accelerate the implementation of the Platform for Action.

In order to monitor the implementation of the Platform for Action more effectively, the Commission also enhanced its own methods of work. In 1997, it agreed to adopt negotiated conclusions on its thematic areas of focus. This method allowed more time for substantive and interactive debates on the area of concern under consideration. Since 1996, experts are invited to participate in the substantive panels on the implementation of the 12 critical areas of concern. The results of these dialogues are reflected in action-oriented agreed conclusions prepared by the Commission's delegates, and are then put forward for adoption as resolutions of the Economic and Social Council. From the Commission's fortieth to forty-eighth sessions, a total of 24 panel discussions were convened. The Division for the Advancement of Women has organized Expert Group Meetings prior to the Commission's sessions on the themes under consideration, thus helping the Commission gather views from around the world by consulting experts from academia and civil society.

The Bureau of the Commission has also been called upon to carry out its work at inter-sessional meetings and consultations on issues and procedures concerning the Commission. At its forty-sixth session, the Commission decided to increase opportunities for sharing national practices on emerging issues by introducing high-level round tables.<sup>46</sup> Since 2003, the Commission has organized roundtables for high-level representatives attending the annual sessions, such as Ministers and State Secretaries. These roundtables have provided a unique forum for high-level exchange of experiences and good practices and have focused on institutional capacity-building, statistics, national mechanisms for the advancement of women and incorporating gender perspectives into national development strategies.

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<sup>45</sup> ECOSOC Resolution 2001/4.

<sup>46</sup> E/CN.6/2005/2



***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 49<sup>th</sup> 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 49<sup>th</sup> 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 internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration. The Declaration recognized that the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) are mutually reinforcing in achieving gender equality and empowerment of women.

The Declaration called upon the UN system, international and regional organizations, all sectors of civil society including non-governmental organizations, as well as all women and men, to fully commit themselves and to intensify their contributions to the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly.

The challenge facing the Commission is further developing means to ensure accountability for implementation of the existing policy framework at the national level. In its 48<sup>th</sup> session, the Commission agreed to enhance the use of interactive events that increase the emphasis on implementation and the sharing of experiences and good practices, as well as exploring ways to incorporate into its sessions emerging issues affecting the situation of women or equality between women and men, and improving its effectiveness and flexibility.<sup>47</sup> The development of a new multi-year programme of work at the 50<sup>th</sup> session provides an important opportunity to increase the focus on implementation.

### ***CEDAW Optional Protocol***

Another major achievement of the Commission in the second half of the 1990s was the elaboration of an Optional Protocol to CEDAW, which introduced the right of petition for women victims of discrimination. After the Fourth World Conference on Women called

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<sup>47</sup> CSW Decision 48/101

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.<sup>48</sup>

### ***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.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Security Council Resolution 1325***

The Commission has also regularly considered the issue of women in armed conflicts, thus contributing to the work that led to the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325

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<sup>48</sup> DAW website: History of an Optional Protocol:  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/protocol/history.htm>

<sup>49</sup> E/CN.6/2005/2

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.