

## **EQUALITY – DEVELOPMENT – PEACE: WOMEN 60 YEARS WITH THE UNITED NATIONS**

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### **Summary**

The history of the United Nations is first being written today. This article is doing its part in filling the gap concerning the economic, social and humanitarian activities of the world organization. The intention is to shed light especially on role of women in the United Nations and the role the UN for advancement of women.

The story begins from the time of the predecessor of the UN, the League of the Nations. Women participated in the history of intergovernmental peace organizations from the very beginning, in 1919. The experiences in those early years gave women courage and competence to attend also the founding events of the United Nations in 1940s. They made their essential finger prints both in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights.

However, first in early 1970s women made their break through into the UN system and consecutively gradually into the politics and development of individual countries. Several initial events launched an avalanche across the UN system and brought women and their issues into the agenda. That process has continued and expanded ever since. It has produced four world conferences on women, international convention of women's rights including the right to control their fertility, gender perspective into the theory and practice of politics and development and gender mainstreaming obligation to the whole UN system.

This paper gives just some snapshots of this history.

Motto:

*“Finding America Columbus discovered half of the world. Of course the Continent had always been there, only we did not know it. Almost 400 more years were needed until half of humanity was discovered – women. They have also been here all of the time, although barely realizing themselves that they should have had their part in deciding what kind of a world they would like to live in.”*

*Helvi Sipilä*, the first woman Assistant Secretary General of the UN 1972-1980, in her memoirs in 1999.

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

The founding of the League of Nations in Paris 1919 was the first step in joint foreign policy between governments toward supra-national goals—such as peace and security—instead of each nation merely defending its national interests against the interests of others. This inter-governmental cooperation aimed at ending wars and violence by the settlement of disputes through negotiations in stead of war. This desire was particularly strong in people's minds after the destruction and horrors of the First World War in Europe (1914-1918).

Women in respective countries realized the nature of these attempts between their governments towards a new kind of cooperation and immediately their interest was awoken; it reflected the yearning for peace in their minds. Another reason for women's interest in this emerging inter-governmental collaboration was their firm belief that the advancement of women required governmental policies and democratic opportunities for women to influence those policies. Women had been cooperating across borders as they worked for peace, and they saw promising chances also for their other endeavours in these new forms of inter-governmental cooperation.

That time the international women's organizations were still very young: most of them had been initiated around the turn of the century – end of 1800, beginning of 1900 - and during the First World War. Therefore it is amazing to see how well-prepared the

representatives of these organizations were already then to intervene in and influence the inter-governmental process. They were ready to organize their own meeting in Paris, formulate their suggestions and ask for an audience with the governmental conference, which they were also provided with.

“While each type of organization clearly had distinct goals and priorities, they all believed that the League of Nations was an important vehicle for social and political reforms, in particular, the advancement of the status of women”. This way *Carol Miller* the first researcher having worked on this history of women and international organizations, summarizes the common interests of women organizations (Miller, 1992).

### **1.1 Women Were Ready to Act**

The women’s delegation had their papers ready; their first proposal was right away that women should be given access to decision-making positions in the League of Nations. They also proposed issues to be included in the programme of the new organization, such as promoting universal suffrage in Member States and to take measures to abolish trafficking in women and children and state-supported prostitution. In addition, they also called for the establishment of international bureaus for education and health, and the control and reduction of armaments, issues which were to be realized first within the United Nations system.

Seemingly due to these proposals, the Covenant of the League of Nations declared that the Member States should promote humane conditions of labour for men, women and children as well as prevent trafficking in women and children. It also included provisions to the effect that all positions in the League of Nations, including the secretariat, should be open equally to women and men.

At the same time, women from American and British trade unions were on the move when the constitution for the International Labour Office, ILO was being drafted. These women called, among other things, for an eight-hour working day, an end to child labour, support for social insurance, pensions and maternity benefits, equal pay for equal work for women and men, as well as minimum wages for housework. Their proposals were politely received but quickly shelved as too radical. However, in the first International Labour Conference in 1919 the governments adopted the first six of International Labour Conventions, which dealt for instance with maternity protection, night work of women and minimum age of workers.

After the founding of the League of Nations and the ILO, representatives of women’s organizations established the Liaison Committee of Women’s International Organizations, which became “the voice of women” in Geneva, where both the LN and ILO had located their Headquarters. Women decided to observe regularly the proceedings and work of these inter-governmental organizations and prepare and propose their suggestions to government representatives when appropriate. This was the beginning of the dialogue and cooperation between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the inter-governmental organization (IGO) at the international level.

To characterize the relationships that time between women's organizations and the League of Nations, Carol Miller, refers to two ground-breaking achievements:

First, women created a model for cooperation and interaction between non-governmental organizations and inter-governmental organizations. Formerly only Heads of State, foreign ministers and diplomats were entitled to participate in inter-governmental conferences. Women, however, demanded the right of access to meetings in the conference halls and to official documents, and the right to distribute their statements in the halls and interact with official delegates - literally to lobby. They were first granted these rights at the League of Nations World Disarmament Conference in 1932, and later at other meetings.

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

Although pacifist aims, disarmament and peace were important reasons for women to support the League of Nations, Miller points out that feminist objectives - the essence of which was the legal recognition of women's equality - were equally significant. From this perspective, the founding of the Committee of Experts on Legal Status of Women by the LN in 1937 was in itself a victory. It showed that securing equality between women and men, and the status of women, were issues that could not be left to governments alone. These early days saw systematic work toward convincing the League of Nations to draw up and in the course of time to adopt an international equal rights convention. That time, then, came first 1979 by means of the United Nations.

These were also the times of formulating a "dialectic", indirect, two-way strategy, that has been used ever since to advance women's objectives also throughout the history of the United Nations. When women have found it very slow or impossible to promote their objectives at the national level in their own countries, they have realized that it would be possible to take the issue to inter-governmental organizations.

Then women's collaboration at the international level within these organizations has some times resulted in resolutions and recommendations, even international conventions that are more advanced than those adopted at national level in Member States. Women have then used these officially adopted inter-governmental instruments effectively at the national level to pressure their governments and legislators to adopt and implement compatible laws in their respective countries.

As British pacifist and feminist *Vera Brittain* said as early as in 1920s, "The time has now come to move from the national to the international sphere, and to endeavour to obtain by international agreement what national legislation has failed to accomplish" (Miller, 1994).

## **1.2. The Process Continuing – Experiences Transferring**

The League of Nations' positive and cooperative attitudes with women was based on the realization that women were a valuable lobbying and support group for the League in several Member States. Women, on the other hand, saw the League as a new and powerful arena for advancing their objectives: peace, human rights and women's equality in all countries. Thus due to women's tenacious and clever diplomacy, the League of Nations was soon in advance of most of its Member States concerning women's issues.

Within the actions in the 1920s and 1930s also a substantial number of women gained experience and expertise in the international arena and networking. Women in official government delegations, representatives of women's organizations and women in significant positions in the League of Nations kept in touch with each other and acted in consort to further their shared objectives.

However, it was not until 25 years later, at the founding of the UN, that some of the proposals made in 1919 by women reached the ears of the governments. Women's early proposals included international collaboration in fields such as education and health care, but the world had to wait until 1940s to see the establishment the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) to address these issues. Women also early had demands regarding disarmament and arms control - issues that were to become fundamental elements of the UN's work from the outset.

The activities of women's organizations that time can also be compared to the large-scale NGO conferences arranged in connection with UN world conferences in recent years. In Paris in 1919 a handful of newly-established women's international organizations arranged the first parallel NGO conference to coincide with an inter-governmental conference. The aim of the parallel conference was to make women's voices heard in governmental discussions.

In recent decades, parallel NGO conferences have become a permanent feature in connection with UN world conferences. They gather thousands of people from around the world to monitor the inter-governmental process and to network internationally among women and their organizations. These people's fora often also create massive publicity for issues that activists from around the world want to bring to the public's attention. NGO events parallel to UN conferences on women have attracted the greatest participation.

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

The existence of the League of Nations ended with the onset of the Second World War. In retrospect, however, the work carried out during its existence was not wasted.

History shows that the basis and models for inter-governmental cooperation created by the League of Nations formed a firm base on which to build a new governmental peace organization, the United Nations. Also the model for cooperation between civil society

and inter-governmental organizations had been created. Furthermore, so-called women's issues had gained visibility and began to appear more often on the agenda of the international community.

Women's experience from the LN was an indispensable asset when the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco 1945 was approaching. Consequently, women were appointed to several of the government delegations participating in the conference. Four of the women delegates - Minerva Bernardino (Dominican Republic), Bertha Lutz (Brazil), Wu Yi-Fang (China) and Virginia Gildersleeve (USA) - were among the 160 signatories of the UN Charter as representatives of their governments.

These women were very active also in the movement that demanded the Preamble to the UN Charter reaffirm not only "faith in fundamental human rights" and "the dignity and worth of the human person," but also in "the equal rights of men and women." This wording was incorporated into the Charter and later generations have regarded it to be of crucial importance since in this way the Charter legitimized from the beginning demands for equal rights of women and men alike. Further strength was given to the initial wording by several articles, which affirmed that human rights and fundamental freedoms belong to all "without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion".

Women also pushed for inclusion of an article in the Charter that corresponded to the stipulation in the Covenant of the League of Nations, which makes all positions in the United Nations equally open to men and women. This article 8 was incorporated into the final text of the Charter, and women activists in those days regarded it as another highly significant achievement for the advancement of women. In the years thereafter, however, they must have felt disappointed when observing how the Article was ignored. Only since 1970s has it been given appropriate recognition, and in recent decades the number of women in high positions in the UN system has been increasing rapidly.

The actual work of the United Nations began with an inaugural session of the General Assembly in London in early 1946. Seventeen women participated in the session as delegates or advisers to delegations. They prepared a document entitled "*An Open Letter to the Women of the World*" to introduce the UN to women as "the second attempt of the peoples of the world to live peacefully in a democratic world community". It called on women to take "an important opportunity and responsibility" in promoting these goals in the United Nations and their respective countries. This letter was the first formal articulation of women's voices in the UN and an outline of the role for women to play in a new arena of international politics and cooperation. (United Nations, 1996c, pp.103-108).

The similar struggle as with the UN Charter was also necessary in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights between 1946 and 1948. The active women wanted to make sure that the phrase "equal rights of men and women," would not be watered down in the Declaration's preamble. Minerva Bernardino of the Dominican Republic questioned even the use of the term "everyone" in the preamble; she argued that "in certain countries the term 'everyone' did not necessarily mean every individual, regardless of sex." In the end, Member States voted on whether the Declaration should

reproduce the exact phrase contained in the preamble to the UN Charter. Thirty-two voted in favour, with only two against (China and the United States) and three abstentions.

Women monitored the drafting of the Declaration paragraph-by-paragraph in order to prevent the inclusion of any sexist phrases. It took extensive debate to erase the word “man” when referring to all people. In fact, it was during this time that the English word “man” was recognized as only meaning literally “man”. Women said the word represents gender, not species; it therefore excludes women. Thanks to the unyielding efforts of women during the Declaration drafting, Article 1 reads, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” instead of “All men...” And in place of “every man” and “no man,” the words “everyone” and “no one” are used throughout the text.

In fact, the “universal” Declaration appears somewhat different in different translations. For example, in French it still includes wording such as *Droits de l’Homme* (Rights of Man) to signify “human rights.”

Still in her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday interview in 1992 Ms. Bernardino said: “I am very proud to have been instrumental in changing the name of the Declaration of the ‘Rights of Men’ to the Declaration of Human Rights.” She believed women who fought for this were “conscious that they were making a revolution.” This revolution continued in the 1950s and included issues such as the right to live with dignity. “In interpreting these words,” she said, “we denounced, in the United Nations, the horrible mutilations of women in certain religious/cultural rituals in certain regions in Africa. We started a job that has not yet ended. Women have not really worked in solidarity to end it.” Ms. Bernardino placed emphasis on solidarity “because it is the key to success. Just causes in general always win, I am convinced, but without solidarity you do not achieve your specific goals.”

In hindsight one can only imagine the kind of a document the Universal Declaration of Human Rights might have become had it been written solely by men - even though the drafting commission was chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. The adoption of the Declaration by the General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 was a triumph. Ever since, the Declaration has been used in the United Nations as a basis for promoting equal rights and freedoms, and codifying human rights into numerous well-known, legally binding international conventions.

### **3. New Dimensions in the UN – Economic, Social and Human Rights Issues.**

The UN Charter gave to the new world organization the mandate “to promote economic and social progress and development” in addition to its political tasks. The importance of the economic and social development activities increased rapidly in 1960-1970s and since then it has become by far the biggest and most important part of the UN system. *The Economic and Social Council, ECOSOC*, one of the five principal organs of the UN, was established to be in charge of these operations. It is as important in the economic field as the Security Council is in the political.

In the recent decades the economic and social activities and programmes have constituted about 80% of all the resources - both personal and financial – of the UN main organization. If we count also the huge Specialized Agencies working almost totally with the economic and social issues and linked with the UN, this proportion of the economic and social part of the UN system is reaching around 90% of all resources.

The main part of the political and administrative structure under ECOSOC is the eight Functional Commissions designated for various fields. They are composed of the State Members of the UN, who can initiate new items, programmes and processes into the UN agenda and exercise the final decision making on each particular field.

These Commissions have been for years also of great interest to the NGOs, since they are the channels also for NGOs to lobby new initiatives into the UN process. Especially the Commissions on Human Rights, the Status of Women, Social Development and Sustainable Development are of particular interest for women.

The scope and mandate of the functions of these bodies are further defined in the UN Charter:

- ECOSOC being in charge of the whole economic and social field is mandated to establish also subsidiary bodies within the UN system to work in practice in this field, such as UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP, etc. As mentioned above, another huge field being linked to the UN system through ECOSOC are the old and new international specialized agencies in the economic, social and cultural field, such as ILO, FAO, UNESCO, WHO, etc.
- The Commission on Human Rights has the obligation that “the UN shall promote universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.” Also this human rights field has grown very much in scope and importance during the decades. It is also the field of sharp conflicts and contradictions concerning the interpretations and applications of human rights in various cases and places.
- The Charter provides also the framework of consultative status for the NGOs to attend as observers in the UN events on economic and social field. Through these provisions the women’s organizations have actively attended the sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women from its beginning and later also the major global conferences.

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## Bibliography

Explanatory note:

There are referred to several United Nations documents and publications in this Bibliography. Most of them have double coding: They have either UN document symbol like: (E/CN.14/714) or/and the code of the UN Blue Book Series, Volume VI: *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women*, where the documents reproduced are assigned a number (Document 1; Document 2, etc.). In order facilitate access to the documents both codes and reference to the Blue Book are indicated here. The documents are available either at the United Nations depository libraries around the world - at least one in each UN Member State – and at the Dag Hammarskjöld Library at UN Headquarters in New York. The Blue Book Series is possibly available also in main University Libraries.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Hilkka Pietilä** is an independent researcher and author. Helsinki, Finland, associated with the Institute of Development Studies, Helsinki University, Finland.

She was born in rural Finland and finished her college in country side. She came for academic studies to Helsinki and passed her examination in Helsinki University 1956 in *nutrition, microbiology and household economics*. She worked on her professional fields until 1963, when she became the Secretary General of the Finnish United Nations Association until 1990. In this work she gained insight into the global situation on her field, nutrition, as well as to the development problematics globally and locally both in developing countries and Finland.

She has published widely on development issues, peace and international cooperation, the United Nations and advancement of women, ecological and feminist issues etc. in different languages, in addition to hundreds of articles in Finnish. In English she has published two books: *Making Women Matter. The Role of the United Nations*, together with Jeanne Vickers, third updated and extended edition, Zed Books, London, 1996, and *Engendering the Global Agenda. The Story of Women and the United Nations*, Development Dossier by the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service, Geneva, 2002. She has also another article in the EOLSS: *Cultivation and Households: the Basics for Nurturing Human Life*", in Human Resources Policy and Management Section 2003.