

## **History of the CSW and NGO Participation by Marlene Parenzan, IFBPW**

Opening of the CSW 60th Session Livestream at Vienna International Center

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I was asked to talk about the history of the CSW from the viewpoint of a long time observer and active NGO representative. In addition, I will also talk about the four World Conferences on Women, organized by the CSW.

### **Birth**

The coming to life, the birth of the Commission, reflected already what later became a tradition: the constant appeal for inclusiveness in all documents, legal instruments and official structures.

In 1945, when delegates gathered in San Francisco to sign the UN Charter, only 4 out of 160 delegates were women, powerful women: Minerva Bernardino (Dominican Republic), Virginia Gildersleeve (United States), Bertha Lutz (Brazil) and Wu Yi Fang (China). They made sure the Preamble speaks not only of faith in fundamental human rights etc but also of the equal rights of men and women. The UN Charter came into force October 1945.

In London, in 1946, a sub-commission on the status of women under the Commission on Human Rights was established. But women delegates and representatives of NGOs called for a full commission – in its own right – and already in June 1946 the sub-commission formally became the Commission on the Status of Women, supported by a section of the UN Secretariat which in 1978 became the Branch for the Advancement of Women.

The [Commission on the Status of Women](#) (CSW) met for the first time at Lake Success, New York, in February 1947. All 15 government representatives were women and from the beginning the CSW forged a close relationship with non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) who were invited to participate as observers. ECOSOC Resolutions 1296 and 1996 are the basis for the UN/NGO relationship and participation, including regulations regarding written and oral statements by NGOs.

### **Focus of the CSW on Women's Rights (1947-1962)**

For the first 15 years, from 1947 to 1962, the Commission - meeting only bi-annually - focused on setting standards and formulating international conventions to change discriminatory legislation and foster global awareness of women's issues. Input and contributions from many NGOs were incorporated into UN resolutions as well as into the formulation of standards. Since the codification of the legal rights of women needed to be supported by data and analysis, the Commission started a global assessment process of the status of women and over the years built a close working relationship with the international human rights treaty bodies, such as the Commission on Human Rights and the CSW negotiated for the insertion of some gender-sensitive language in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Paris 1948).

There are other conventions the CSW drafted and participated in drafting and in 1967 the GA adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, followed in 1979 by the legally binding [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#) and

ultimately in 1999 the Optional Protocol to the Convention, all instruments drafted by the Commission.

### **CSW Focus on the Participation of Women in Development (1963 - 1975)**

The Commission encouraged the UN system to expand its technical assistance to further the advancement of women, especially in developing countries. In 1972, to mark its 25th anniversary, the Commission recommended and the GA endorsed the recommendation that **1975 be designated International Women's Year** to draw attention to women's equality with men and to their contributions to development and peace. To highlight the IWY of 1975 the [First World Conference on Women](#) was held in Mexico City, followed by the **1976–1985 UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace**. The International Conference was already attended by representatives of 114 NGOs. Parallel to the Conference, as an independent activity, the International Women's Year Tribune was organized by an "organizing committee" appointed by CoNGO and in consultation with ECOSOC and the government of Mexico. The format was already that of other NGO fora to follow, including the publication of a daily newspaper called Xilonen (see). The final count for the Tribune was 6000 women registered as participants. I quote from the last issue of the Xilonen: Participant reaction to the Tribune extends the full range of emotions: disappointment, hope, excitement, satisfaction.

The International Women's Tribune Center - a wonderful resource center located in the Church Center in NY opposite the UN at 42nd street - grew out of the Tribune held in Mexico because so many requests for information were coming in. It was funded by Canadian, Dutch and Swedish Development agencies, the Ford Foundation and some church groups.

In 1979, the Vienna International Centre (VIC) was opened as the third HQ of the UN and the Branch for the Advancement of Women moved from New York to Vienna, where it was joined by the Social Affairs Division from Geneva forming the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs (CSDHA).

**The Commission on the Status of Women as well as the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women met in Vienna until 1993.** The first meeting of CEDAW was in October 1982. NGO Committees on Aging, Youth, Family, Drugs, Crime Prevention and of course Women were set up in the following years, to bundle NGO interests on issues the CSDHA was in charge of.

From now on NGO representation based in Vienna had the unique opportunity to establish closer contacts with the Branch, the Secretariat of the CSW, and to the CSW itself. This often meant a relatively larger influence of NGOs due to personal contacts and early knowledge of and access to documentation for the CSW sessions and preparatory meetings etc prepared by the Branch for the Advancement of Women (from 1979-93 based in Vienna).

**The Second World Conference on Women** took place in [Copenhagen](#) in 1980 with a parallel NGO Forum. Outcome document of the Conference „The World Programme of Action“ called for the elimination of discrimination in law and policy. After long discussions, 11 NGOs were allowed to speak in Plenary of the governmental conference, among them ICW, IAW, IFBPW and WIDF. The Conference recommended that the Commission on the Status of Women be strengthened and given full responsibility to prepare the end of decade conference in 1985. Parallel to the Conference, the Copenhagen NGO Forum 80 was held at the Bella Center of the University of Copenhagen attended by 8000 women. From

documents I gather that this Forum for some was much more inclusive - as panels were possible on any given subject and there was plenty of room - while others felt that it was not focused and women were often frustrated.

There were several demonstrations – as always - at the site and outside the Forum venue, one rather violently dispersed by Danish police – on a **side note** : a fact that much later in 1992/1993 was referred to by the host country China for the 1995 world conference as something they absolutely wanted to avoid and consequently suggested to me as then **NGO Coordinator of the Planning Committee** to make sure we only admitted „nice and well behaved“ NGOs to the Meeting in Beijing! Which I of course could not accept as we had no system of controlling NGOs, and in addition, were not willing to do so. Forum participation was open to anyone who could get a visa and housing.

Coming back to the 1970s: To wrap up the **UN Decade for Women**, the next Conference was proposed to be held in **1985**. From 1970 to 1986 the Commission only met biannually – and it had not been „constructed“ to deal with all the preparatory work for the Decade and the World Conferences. As mentioned earlier, the mandate of the CSW was upgraded and strengthened following a recommendation by the 1980 Copenhagen Conference and it was given the full responsibility for the preparation of the **1985 Third World Conference on Women to review and appraise the achievements of the UN Decade for Women to be held in Nairobi, Kenya**.

The CSW supported by B/DAW undertook the preparatory work and prepared background documentation such as the first World Survey on the Role of Women focussing on women's economic roles.

And this time we NGO representatives in Vienna could really mobilize input to preparations of the Conference as well as to the parallel Nairobi **NGO Forum 85**. I myself had the honor to serve as NGO Convenor for the newly established group „Young Women and Girls“ within the Planning Committee set up by CoNGO (representing WAGGGS at that time). Preparations for the Conference were made by the CSW including the draft „Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies“ worked on in Vienna by the B/DAW also with input from members of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women Vienna.

The Nairobi Forum 85 was attended by approx 12000 participants, many of them from African countries. The Conference adopted the **Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (NFLS)** which served as a guideline for policies on women for the future. Based on a GA mandate, the CSW was leading the monitoring process on the implementation of the NFLS and started to promote women's equality as a cross-cutting issue within the UN system as well among member states. Women's issues were no longer separate issues, but part of the mainstream.

At the same time, new UN offices dedicated to women were established, in particular the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM 76) and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW 79).

**From 1987 on the Commission met annually** and elaborated a multi-year programme of work for the first time in 1987, containing priority themes for discussion and action at its annual sessions.

## **Violence against women**

As part of the **follow-up** to the Third World Conference on Women in **Nairobi**, the Commission took the lead in coordinating and promoting the UN system's work on economic and social issues for women's empowerment and the Commission helped bring violence against women to the forefront of international debate for the first time. (I remember vividly that violence against women had already been a burning issue in discussions before and at the 1985 NGO Forum in Nairobi.)

In 1994, also in light of mainstreaming the issue, a **UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences** was appointed by the Commission on Human Rights, with a mandate to investigate and report on all aspects of violence against women.

Some of the post Nairobi efforts „resulted in a a change of definition of violence which no longer was considered a private matter but a public and human rights question. The [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#) drafted by the CSW was adopted by the General Assembly on 20 December 1993.

Already at that time, the CSW and the CEDAW Committee started discussing the introduction of an Optional Protocol to CEDAW, i.e. the right of petition for women victims of discrimination (individuals or groups) which was finally, after years of deliberations, adopted by the GA in 1999 without a vote and it entered into force on 20 December 2000.

#### **Fourth World Conference on Women 1995 Beijing, China**

The Commission of course also served as the preparatory body for the 1995 [Fourth World Conference on Women](#) Action for Equality, Development and Peace

I personally served as NGO-Coordinator for the NGO Forum 95, with an office in the VIC graciously provided for by the UN/DAW until the end of 1993 – when NGO activities were co-ordinated from New York under the leadership of Irene Santiago.

Invited by the UN, I was privileged to participate in the **first UN mission to Beijing in 1993** as the **only NGO representative** attending official preparatory meetings of the host country and the UN. On a side note: The decision of the host country to move the venue for the NGO Forum to Huairou, about 80 km from Beijing, for security reasons, after I had been shown the Beijing Workers Stadium in Beijing itself as venue for Forum activities and meetings, came not really as a surprise to the NGOs. Huairou proved to be a site with unfinished buildings, bad roads etc - but in the end we managed to hold a successful Forum for over 30,000 NGO delegates there.

Leading up to the Conference, Regional preparatory meetings were held in the five UN regions and the ECE preparatory meeting took place in Vienna in 1994 together with the Vienna NGO Forum '94 with over 1200 women and some men.

**1993, the 37th session of the CSW met in Vienna for the last time and later in the year, CSDHA /DAW moved to NY.**

In 1995, the World Conference adopted the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) - most of the language had been agreed on beforehand. Nonetheless, there were some acrimonious conflicts over words. Sex, specifically lesbian rights and abortion, was the hot topic. Sex created some strange alliances: Catholic countries and Islamic fundamentalists agreed that they didn't like a lot of the language in the final document.

However, based on 170 country reports, regional preparatory meetings, tough negotiations on the text – the consensus document set new benchmarks for the

advancement of women and the achievement of gender equality. **The 4th World Conference on Women** was one of the largest conferences of the UN with 6000 delegates at the official governmental conference, 4000 accredited NGOs, 4000 journalists and 30.000 women at the NGO Forum 95 in Huairou. The **NGO Forum in Huairou** was a joint effort by the CoNGO Planning Committee and the China Organizing Committee. Already in the lead up to the Forum, we had extensive discussion with the Chinese Mission in Vienna and later in NY. I assume, as well as in Huairou in 95, daily meetings with the China Organizing Committee solved minor problems and served to prevent others. I remember it as a very delicate diplomatic endeavour. The events organized by NGOs were overwhelming in their diversity and scope of issues. Political problems for instance the participation of Canada-sponsored Tibetan women and the „official“ Tibetan women's group with their beautiful tent sponsored by China were carefully handled by the organizers and also in Huairou, there were political protests, not against China, but against the respective protestors' domestic politics. But they were all taking place within the premises of the Forum (as we had been advised).

The NGO Planning Committee was also responsible for raising funds to run the Forum and I only want to mention one of the major donors, Hewlett Packard. HP gave a PC plus printer including software and training to each regional NGO organizing group, plus the three NGO Committees in NY, Geneva and Vienna and to the Forum Host group in China. All this very early on, so that communication among NGOs became easier. One set remained in the VIC in the NGO Lounge until it became too old to be helpful.

### **Consolidation of the advancement of women?**

As called for in the Platform for Action, an additional UN office for the promotion of gender equality was established: the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI) in 1997.

From **1995 to 2006** - in a process of consolidating the advancement of women - besides playing its role in monitoring the implementation of the BPfA (mandated by the General Assembly) and advising ECOSOC accordingly, the Commission undertook a number of changes in its method of work.

In 1997 negotiations about conclusions on thematic issues were adopted, since 1996 experts are invited for panel discussions on the BPfA's 12 critical areas of concern. The finally agreed conclusions echo these discussions by the delegates and were put forward for adoption by ECOSOC. Expert Group meetings on the relevant topics to be discussed at the Commission were organized beforehand. High level round tables were introduced in 2002 (46th) to increase possibilities of sharing national practices on emerging issues. Best practices were looked for.

Since 2006, the Commission has added an annual review theme, to evaluate the implementation of agreed conclusions from a previous session. Beginning with the 50th session in 2006, the CSW began working within a framework of a multi-year programme of work to focus even more on implementation.

### **To summarize**

Five years after Beijing, in 2000, Beijing+5, the 23rd Special Session of the GA „Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st century“ prepared by the Commission as Preparatory Commission, adopted a Political Declaration. This special session was not a World Conference but a well attended

event, bringing together about 5000 persons including over 2000 from NGOs, the largest special session of the GA ever held at the UN in New York.

In 2005, the 10 year review and appraisal of the BPfA (Beijing +10) was organized within the framework of the 49th session of the CSW with a Declaration as outcome document, reaffirming the commitment of the UN, governments and civil society to undertake all measures to implement the Beijing Declaration and the BPfA. An increasing co-operation among other functional commissions of ECOSOC such as the Comm on Sustainable Development, the Commission on Human Rights and conferences such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002 Johannesburg, SA) and the World Summit on the Information Society (2003 Geneva) were prepared by the CSW.

Even the Security Council enjoyed co-operation with the CSW which in the end resulted in SC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in October 2000. Up to the year 2013, the Security Council had adopted 6 more resolutions on Women, Peace and Security. Collectively the resolutions provide UN Peacekeeping and other programmes with a framework for implementing and monitoring the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

The Development Agenda became part of the deliberations of the CSW, as in 2010 (CSW 54), besides the global 15 year routine review and appraisal process, new challenges were identified related to the **Millenium Development Goals - MDGs**.

In 2011, the four parts of the UN system mentioned before — DAW, INSTRAW, OSAGI and UNIFEM — merged to become **UN Women**, now the **Secretariat of the Commission on the Status of Women**.

**2015 CSW 59:** In addition to the Review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (**Beijing +20**) opportunities for strengthening gender equality and the empowerment of women in the post-2015 development agenda through the integration of a gender perspective were on the agenda of the 59th session.

I stop here and thank you for your attention and will pass the word on to the keynote speaker of today who will quite appropriately focus on the CSW 60 which will soon open in New York.

**2016 CSW 60:** Priority theme: Women's empowerment and the link to sustainable development. Review theme: The elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls.