

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN





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Cover: The World Conference of the International Women's Year in Mexico City, June 1975. Photo: UN Photo/B Lane.

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INTERGOVERNMENTAL SUPPORT DIVISION UN WOMEN

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Secretaries-General of the Women's Conferences. Top, left to right: Helvi Sipilä (Finland), First World Conference on Women, Mexico City; Lucille Mair (Jamaica), Second World Conference on Women, Copenhagen. Bottom, left to right: Leticia Ramos-Shahani (Philippines), Third World Conference on Women, Nairobi; Gertrude Mongella (Tanzania), Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing. Photos: UN Photo.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1946: BIRTH OF THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN	
	4
1947-1962: SECURING THE LEGAL	
FOUNDATIONS OF GENDER EQUALITY	5
1963-1975: PROMOTING THE PARTICIPATION	
OF WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT	7
1976-1985: THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS	
OF WOMEN AND THE UNITED NATIONS	
DECADE FOR WOMEN	9
1986-1995: PUTTING WOMEN ON THE	
GLOBAL AGENDA	11
1996-2005: ADVANCING PROGRESS FOR	
WOMEN	13
2006-2015: ACCELERATING THE	
REALIZATION OF GENDER EQUALITY	
AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN	15
FROM 2015 TO 2030: REALIZING GENDER	
EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF	
ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS	18
ENDNOTES	21

1946: BIRTH OF THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

United Nations commitments to the advancement of women began with the signing of the United Nations Charter in San Francisco in 1945. In its preamble, it reaffirms "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". Of the 160 signatories, only four were women—Minerva Bernardino (Dominican Republic), Virginia Gildersleeve (United States), Bertha Lutz (Brazil) and Wu Yi-Fang (China). Two of them, Bertha Lutz and Minerva Bernardino, had proposed to add "women" to the founding document of the United Nations.

During the inaugural meetings of the United Nations 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, the Subcommission on the Status of Women was established under the Commission on Human Rights. Many women delegates and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) believed nevertheless that a separate body specifically dedicated to women's issues was necessary. The first chairperson of the Subcommission, Bodil Begtrup (Denmark), also requested the Economic and Social Council 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 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 (...).

On 21 June 1946, the Subcommission formally became the Commission on the Status of Women. As a full-fledged commission under the Economic and Social Council, it was dedicated to ensuring women's equality and 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".²

Shortly thereafter, the Section on the Status of Women was established in the Human Rights Division of the United Nations Secretariat to provide secretariat functions. It became the Division for the Advancement of Women in 1978 before being consolidated into UN Women in 2010.



Above left: Delegates to the seventh session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. Above right: The San Francisco Conference, 25 April - 26 June 1945, Bertha Lutz, member of the delegation from Brazil, addresses the meeting of Commission I, Committee 2, held on 15 June 1945. Photos: UN Photo.

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, from 10 to 24 February 1947. At that session, all 15 government representatives were women, giving the Commission the unique character of gathering a majority of women delegates, a distinction it has maintained throughout its history.

From its inception, the Commission forged a close relationship with NGOs. Several international women's organizations addressed the Commission at the first session, and from then on, NGOs in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council were invited to participate as observers. In the 1950s, the average number of NGOs attending sessions rose to between 30 and 50. Openness to civil society has continued to the present as the Commission continues to allow NGO contributions to be incorporated in its work and outcomes.

The 15 original members of the first session of the Commission 10 – 24 February 1947, held at lake Success, New York

Mrs. Jessie Mary Grey Street, Australia

Mrs. Evdokia Uralova, Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic

Mrs. Way Sung New, China

Mrs. Graciela Morales F. de Echeverria, Costa Rica

Mrs. Bodil Begtrup, Denmark

Mrs. Marie Helene Lefaucheux, France

Miss Sara Basterrechea Ramirez, Guatemala

Begum Shareefah Hamid Ali, India

Mrs. Amalia C. de Castillo Ledon, Mexico

Mrs. Alice Kandalft Cosma, Syria

Mrs. Mihri Pektas, Turkey

Mrs. Elizavieta Alekseevna Popova, Union of Soviet

Socialist Republics

Miss Mary Sutherland, United Kingdom

Miss Dorothy Kenyon, United States

Mrs. Isabel Urdaneta, Venezuela

From the beginning, the Commission built working relationships with the (then) Commission on Human Rights and its Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, the Social Commission (later renamed the Commission for Social Development), international human rights treaty bodies, and United Nations organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). The Chairperson of the Commission on the Status of Women was invited to attend the early sessions of the Commission on Human Rights devoted to finalizing the draft international bill of human rights. Copies of preliminary drafts were circulated among members of the Commission on the Status of Women.3

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.⁴

Drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

During the first session of the Commission, members affirmed that it should engage in upcoming discussions on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Contributing to the drafting of the international bill of rights became one of the Commission's first tasks. In revising the articles sent to them for comments, Commission members inserted gendersensitive language—arguing against references to "men" as a synonym for humanity and phrases like "men are brothers". They encountered resistance from members of the Commission on Human Rights, but succeeded in introducing new, more inclusive language, a truly ground-breaking achievement from a historical perspective.

The Commission focuses on women's rights

From 1946 to 1962, the Commission focused its attention on promoting women's rights and equality by setting standards and formulating international conventions. These were aimed at changing discriminatory legislation and fostering global awareness of women's issues. The codification of the legal rights of women, however, needed to be supported by data and analysis on the extent of discrimination against women in law and practice.

The Commission thus embarked on a vast research and polling effort to assess the status of women worldwide. Several questionnaires and studies were launched to collect information on the legal status of women, their access to education, their work opportunities and their civil rights. United Nations Member States provided the Commission with statistics, while NGOs and United Nations entities 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.

Providing women universal access to political rights

The Commission made women's political rights a high priority in its early years of work. In 1945, only 25 of the original 51 Member States allowed women equal voting rights. In his 1950 report to the Commission on discrimination against women in the field of political rights, the United Nations Secretary-General noted that in 22 countries, women still did not have equal rights to vote or hold political office, and that even in some countries where women held such rights, these were not put into practice.9 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 1952.10 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, hold any public office or exercise any public function under national law.

Removing discrimination in marriage

Throughout the 1950s, the Commission turned its attention to discrimination in marriage. United Nations 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),11 followed by the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (adopted on 7 November 1962),12 and the Recommendation on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (adopted on 1 November 1965).13 Together these measures represented the first international agreements on women's rights in marriage.

Other areas of the Commission's work

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 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.¹⁴

In the early 1950s, the Commission also began focusing on traditional practices harmful to women and girls. Due to its efforts, resolutions were adopted by the Economic and Social Council in 1952 and the General Assembly in 1954. These urged Member States to take measures to abolish practices that violated the physical integrity and human rights of women. Traditional practices remained a sensitive issue, however. 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.¹⁵

1963-1975: PROMOTING THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT

Focusing on the situation of women in developing countries

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of profound change in the United Nations. 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 countries. This period 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 approaches to women and development at the United Nations. Increasingly, the Commission's efforts focused on the role of women in development, both as beneficiaries and agents of change.¹⁶

As evidence began to accumulate in the 1960s that women were disproportionately affected by poverty, the work of the Commission centred on women's needs in community and rural development, agricultural work and family planning as well as the impact of scientific and technological advances.¹⁷ It encouraged the United Nations to expand its technical assistance to further the advancement of women, especially in developing countries.¹⁸ In the wake of Ester Boserup's influential study "Woman's Role in Economic Development" (1970), and the interest in economic issues it raised 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.¹⁹ 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.20 The Commission also appointed a Special Rapporteur to report on ways to eliminate stereotypes in the mass media's portrayal and coverage of women and girls.

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.21 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."22 The drafting process was supported from the beginning by women's rights activists working both within and outside the United Nations system. Drafting of the declaration by a committee, selected from within the Commission, began in 1965. On 7 November 1967, the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was adopted by the General Assembly.23

While the Declaration was an important step in securing the legal foundation for women's equality, its impact on the ground was more limited. The reporting procedures for 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 on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which was ultimately adopted in 1979—largely grew out of the perception that attempts to implement the Declaration had been limited.²⁴

1975: International Women's Year

In 1972, to mark its 25th anniversary, the Commission recommended that 1975 be designated International Women's Year²⁵—an idea introduced by the Government of Romania on behalf of the Women's International Democratic Federation. Observance of the year 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. After the Commission proposed equality and development as two themes for the year, the General Assembly added a third, recognizing women's increasing contribution to world peace. It thereby set a three-pronged agenda—equality, development and peace—for the advancement of women. ²⁶

The World Conference of 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 General Assembly. The World Conference of the International Women's Year subsequently took place in Mexico City in 1975. It drew 133 Governments as participants, while for the first time, 6,000 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 comprehensive guidelines for the advancement of women until 1985.27 A long-sought process of change had been set in motion. 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.28

The World Conference of the International Women's Year opened at the Juan de la Barrera Gymnasium in Mexico City on 19 June 1975. A general view of the inauguration ceremony of the Conference. Seated at the right of the presiding table is President Luis Echeverria of Mexico. Photo: UN Photo/B Lane.



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 United Nations declared 1976 to 1985 the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace.²⁹ The Decade contributed to bringing further 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.³⁰

From the Declaration to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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. Drafting 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 prepared by working groups within the Commission during 1976. Extensive deliberations continued from 1977 to 1979, through a working group of the Third Committee³¹ of the General Assembly.

The Convention was finally adopted by the General Assembly in 1979, by a vote of 130 Member States in favour, with 10 abstentions. It entered into force on 3 September 1981, just 30 days after the 20th State had ratified it, faster than any previous human rights convention.

In article 1, the Convention became the first international instrument to define discrimination against women, describing it as:

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.

In a comprehensive and legally binding form, the Convention's 30 articles brought together a series of internationally accepted principles on the rights of women. Article 3 committed States parties 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.

This international bill of rights for women—as it is often described—has also proven throughout its almost 40 years of existence to be a living instrument. Through general recommendations issued by its expert Committee, States' obligations in relation to issues of concern not explicitly mentioned in the treaty, such as violence against women, HIV/AIDS, women with disabilities, and the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change, have been clarified.³²

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, Denmark. In addition to reaffirming the importance of the CEDAW Convention, the Conference sought

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.33 These issues came to the forefront based on the mutual understanding that the broad goals of equality, development and peace could not be achieved unless they were refined into specific, highly focused objectives for women.34 The 1980 Programme of Action agreed in Copenhagen 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 parallel NGO Forum to network and discuss the major themes of the Conference.

Strengthening the Commission on the Status of Women

Through the Decade for Women, efforts to advance the status of women expanded at the United Nations and were increasingly taken up in development programmes.³⁵ The reporting and implementation mechanisms established for the Decade had been diffused throughout the United Nations regional commissions, funds and programmes, and specialized agencies. New organizations dedicated to women had been established, such as the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW).³⁶

From 1970 to 1986, the Commission only met biennially. It had not been designated as the preparatory body for the World Conference of the International Women's Year or the World Conference on the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace. At that time, the Commission also had little input to 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.³⁷ The 1980 World Conference,

however, recommended that the Commission be strengthened³⁸ and given full responsibility for the preparation of the end-of-decade conference, the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the UN Decade for Women.³⁹

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"⁴⁰, with a focus on women's economic roles, was prepared by the Division for the Advancement of Women, the Commission's secretariat, 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, Kenya, in 1985, with a mandate to establish concrete measures to overcome the obstacles to achieving the Decade's goals. Participants included 1,900 delegates from 157 Member States along with representatives of the UN Secretariat, its regional commissions and eight specialized agencies; 17 intergovernmental organizations; four national liberation movements and 163 NGOs. The parallel NGO Forum 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.

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. It outlined a series of measures for achieving 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. Its five-member Bureau, comprising one representative from each of the five regions, began serving for two years. 42 Membership increased to 45 seats allocated on the basis of equitable geographical distribution (13 members from African States, 11 members from Asian and Pacific States, 4 members from Eastern European States, 9 members from Latin American and Caribbean States, and 8 members from Western European and Other States.)43

The Commission 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.⁴⁴ As a result, the Commission's efforts shifted towards promoting women's equality as a cross-cutting theme in economic development, human rights, and political, cultural as well as social policy issues. Its approach was now to deal with women's issues as part of mainstream agendas, rather than as a separate concern.⁴⁵

Exposing violence against women as a public matter

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Commission on the Status of Women, the CEDAW Committee and, eventually, the Commission on Human Rights brought the issue of violence against women—which so far had been considered a private matter, rather than 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 on the Status of Women undertook the drafting of a declaration on ending violence against women in the early 1990s, which led to the adoption of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women by the General Assembly on 20

December 1993. During this period, the Commission and the CEDAW Committee also 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 by the Commission on Human Rights, as an independent expert with a mandate to investigate and report on all aspects of violence against women. The Special Rapporteur interacts with the Commission on the Status of Women, the CEDAW Committee and other relevant United Nations bodies, and contributes to reinforcing the links between the Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission on Human Rights, and, later, the Human Rights Council.

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 a drive, led by the United Nations, 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 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, Austria; the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt; the 1995 World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen, Denmark; the 1996 Habitat II Conference on Human Settlements in Istanbul, Turkey; and the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, Italy. With pressure from women's groups, these conferences and summits further raised awareness and placed gender equality issues at the centre of international discourse and policymaking related to the environment, population, reproductive health, human rights, food security, social development and human settlements.

1995: Fourth World Conference on Women

One of the greatest achievements of the Commission on the Status of Women was the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China in 1995. It significantly advanced the global agenda for women's human rights and gender equality. The Commission and its secretariat led the preparatory process, developing the draft outcome document—the Platform for Action—in a very participatory and comprehensive manner that included five regional preparatory meetings in 1994 as well as several NGO meetings. The Commission received 170 country reports that served as a basis for recommendations made in the Platform for Action

While the preparatory process revealed diverging views that 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 empowerment of women and the achievement of gender equality.⁴⁶The Beijing Declaration and 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 and policy advances aimed at securing the equality of women with men in law and in practice.

The intergovernmental meeting held in Beijing and the related NGO Forum in nearby Huairou were the largest gatherings of government, NGO and media representatives ever for a United Nations conference. The intergovernmental conference convened 6,000 delegates from 189 governments; more than 4,000 accredited NGO representatives; and about 4,000 journalists and media representatives. The 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.









All photos from the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, September 1995. Clockwise from top left: Chen Muhua, President of the Executive Committee of the All-China Women's Federation. Photo: UN Photo/Yao Da Wei. Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, Prime Minister of Pakistan; Hillary Clinton, First Lady of the United States; Begum Khaleda Zia, Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Photos: UN Photo/Milton Grant.

1996-2005: ADVANCING PROGRESS FOR WOMEN

The Commission on the Status of Women revamps its methods of work

As the preparatory body for the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, the Commission was subsequently mandated by the General Assembly to play a central role in monitoring the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and advising the Economic and Social Council thereon.⁴⁷ Expanding on a practice initiated in 1987,⁴⁸ the Commission put in place multiyear programmes of work for 1997 to 2000⁴⁹ and 2002 to 2006.⁵⁰ Under these, it reviewed implementation of the critical areas of concern of the Platform for Action as priority themes, and made recommendations on concrete measures to accelerate implementation.

The Commission enhanced its own methods of work to enable the effective implementation of its multiyear programmes.51 In 1996, it agreed that the results of dialogues on the critical areas of concern should normally be reflected in concise, action-oriented agreed conclusions.⁵² This method was expected to allow more time for substantive and interactive debates. Experts were invited to participate as panelists on the implementation of the critical areas of concern. The Commission's secretariat, the Division for the Advancement of Women, organized expert group meetings prior to Commission sessions on the themes under consideration. Through these, the Commission gathered cutting-edge knowledge and experiences from experts and practitioners from academic and civil society organizations around the world.

The Bureau of the Commission, and especially its Chairperson, took on a stronger leadership role in preparing and managing sessions. This included regular intersessional consultations on procedures and programmes of work. As the number of ministers, State secretaries and heads of national mechanisms for gender equality and the empowerment of women attending the sessions steadily increased, the

Commission added high-level round tables to create opportunities for sharing national experiences and lessons learned. These provided a unique forum for dialogue and contributed to institutional capacity-building, collaboration and the incorporation of gender perspectives into national development strategies.

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

In 2000, the General Assembly, on the recommendation of the Commission on the Status of Women, decided to hold its twenty-third special session in order to conduct a five- year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and to consider future actions and initiatives.⁵³ The Commission, acting as the preparatory committee, negotiated a draft political declaration and outcome document for adoption at the special session. The United Nations regional commissions convened preparatory meetings to ensure a regional perspective on implementation and further actions and initiatives.

Entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century," the special session took place in New York at United Nations 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. ⁵⁴ Approximately 5,000 people participated in the event, including 2,300 representatives of governments, and over 2,000 people representing 1,036 NGOs. The NGO Committee and the New York Host Committee organized over 60 panels and workshops on the critical areas of concern. It was the largest special session of the General Assembly ever held in New York.

Following the special session, the Commission integrated the outcome document in its follow-up and review work

CEDAW Optional Protocol

A major achievement of the Commission in the second half of the 1990s was the elaboration of an Optional Protocol to CEDAW on a right to petition for women victims of discrimination. Both the World Conference on Human Rights (1993) and the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) had called for the introduction of such a right under the Convention.

The Commission established an open-ended working group in 1996, which concluded its work in 1999. In a landmark decision for women on 6 October 1999, the General Assembly, acting without a vote, adopted a 21-article Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. The Optional Protocol contains two procedures. A communications procedure allows individual women, or groups of women, to submit claims of violations of rights protected under the Convention to the CEDAW Committee. An inquiry procedure enables the CEDAW Committee to initiate inquiries into situations of grave or systematic violations of women's rights. The Optional Protocol entered into force on 22 December 2000, following the ratification of the tenth State party to the Convention. 55

Gender mainstreaming

The Beijing Platform for Action confirmed gender mainstreaming as a key strategy for realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, through all policies and programmes. Subsequently, the Commission on the Status of Women enhanced its catalytic role in support of gender mainstreaming. It regularly contributed to the follow-up and review of other international conferences to increase attention to gender perspectives. The Commission also made available the outcome of its work to other functional commissions, such as the Commission on Sustainable Development in 1997. For the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development 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 the 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 in Geneva, Switzerland.

Security Council Resolution 1325

The Commission has regularly considered the issue of women in armed conflicts, thus contributing to the work that led to the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security. In its 2004 agreed conclusions, the Commission addressed women's equal participation in conflict prevention, management and resolution, and in post-conflict peacebuilding.

2006-2015: ACCELERATING THE REALIZATION OF GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

The Commission at 50

The Commission marked its fiftieth session in 2006 with an overhaul and further improvements to its methods of work⁵⁶ so as to better respond to new challenges and opportunities. It reaffirmed its primary responsibility for the follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. It also refined a focused approach to its work while adding greater accountability for action on commitments made.

This meant that, starting with the fifty-first session in 2007, the Commission considered only one priority theme at each session, with an outcome in the form of agreed conclusions negotiated by all States. It added a review theme to evaluate progress in the implementation of agreed conclusions from a previous session. The Commission maintained discussion of emerging issues, trends and new approaches to issues affecting women or equality between women and men that require urgent consideration through interactive expert panels. While the priority and review themes for several years were determined in advance through the multiyear programme of work, the emerging issue was chosen intersessionally, which enabled the Commission to respond quickly to new opportunities or needs. Participation by NGOs in the work of the Commission was given added weight, thus confirming the historical linkages between the women's movement and the leading global intergovernmental body dealing with gender issues.

Establishment of UN Women

By far the most momentous institutional change in addressing gender issues in the United Nations came with the decision, by the General Assembly in July 2010, to establish UN Women, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment

of Women.⁵⁷ The new entity consolidated four previously distinct parts of the United Nations system that focused exclusively on gender equality and women's empowerment, namely: the Division for the Advancement of Women and the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women of the Secretariat; the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW); and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). This decision had direct relevance for the work of the Commission, as its previous secretariat, the Division for the Advancement of Women, was now an integral part of the new entity.

Consequently, since the Commission's fifty-fifth session in 2011, UN Women has served as its substantive secretariat, supporting all aspects of its work, and enhancing its visibility and impact. UN Women prepares reports and other substantive documentation for the Commission, providing analysis and evidence on the status of gender equality and recommendations for further action. It offers expertise and support to the Chairperson and Bureau in preparing the session and works to mobilize stakeholders to enhance commitment and strengthen action. UN Women supports Member States in their deliberations as well as in national follow-up and implementation of commitments and facilitates the meaningful participation of NGOs in Commission sessions.

From the outset, UN Women prioritized support for the strengthening of a comprehensive set of global norms, policies and standards on gender equality and women's empowerment. To this end, the entity contributes to advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women in gender-specific and all other relevant intergovernmental processes, as a goal in itself and an essential step in the realization of human rights, peace and security, and development.

As a composite entity, UN Women also supports the implementation of the global normative frameworks at country level. An additional responsibility entails leading, coordinating and promoting the accountability of the United Nations system in its work on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

In establishing UN Women, the General Assembly confirmed that the Commission on the Status of Women, together with the Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, constitute the multi-tiered intergovernmental governance structure for the normative support functions of UN Women and provides normative policy guidance to the Entity. UN Women's key role in supporting the work of the Commission was reaffirmed by the Council when it reviewed the Commission's methods of work in 2015.58 The General Assembly also established an Executive Board which, together with the Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, constitutes the multi-tiered intergovernmental governance structure for the operational activities and provides operational policy guidance to the Entity.59

Five-year reviews of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twentythird special session of the General Assembly

Following the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly in 2000, Member States entrusted the Commission to conduct subsequent five-year comprehensive reviews of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcomes of the special session. Such "+5" reviews were held in 2005, (CSW49), 2010 (CSW54) and 2015 (CSW59), as part of the Commission's multiyear programmes of work.60 The reviews were consistently characterized by broad-based participation and inclusiveness. There was a strong focus on comprehensive national reviews as essential building blocks for regional reviews. Held under the auspices of the United Nations regional commissions, the latter culminated in the Commission's own global review. Governments were encouraged to continue to support the roles and

contributions of civil society, and to collaborate with relevant stakeholders in the preparations so as to benefit from their experience and expertise.

In addition to their focus on progress in implementation, the reviews encouraged the sharing of experiences and good practices with a view to overcoming remaining obstacles and new challenges. In 2010, the review made a strong link with the full realization of the Millennium Development Goals. In 2015, the review anticipated opportunities for strengthening gender equality and the empowerment of women in the post-2015 development agenda, which was then under preparation in the General Assembly.

For each review cycle,⁶¹ many Member States prepared national reports: 135 for Beijing+10 in 2005, 140 for Beijing+15 in 2010 and 164 for Beijing+20 in 2015.⁶² The reports covered major achievements and remaining gaps and challenges in implementation at the national level and served as the basis for regional and global synthesis reports. They provided reporting countries with a foundation for assessing their own progress and challenges.⁶³

While the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly issued a political declaration and a comprehensive document with further actions and initiatives to implement the Platform for Action, subsequent reviews by the Commission resulted in short political declarations that welcomed progress made. Ministers and other high-level government representatives pledged to undertake further action to ensure the full and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session. 64

In 2015, as work towards the post-2015 development agenda accelerated, the Commission recognized, in its Political Declaration,⁶⁵ that no country had fully achieved equality and empowerment for women and girls, that progress had been slow and uneven, that major gaps remained and that new challenges had emerged in the implementation of the 12 critical areas of concern of the Platform for Action. Member States pledged to achieve measurable results by 2020 and full gender equality and the empowerment of women by 2030.

Critically, the Political Declaration identified six strategies to accelerate implementation, namely: strengthened laws and policies; strengthened and increased support for institutional mechanisms for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; the transformation of discriminatory norms

and gender stereotypes; significantly increased investment to close resource gaps in the implementation of the Platform for Action; strengthened accountability for the implementation of existing commitments; and enhanced capacity-building, data collection, monitoring and evaluation.





Above: UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. Photo: UN Women/Susan Markisz. Below: Participants listen as UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka addresses the Working Group on Girls Teen Orientation during CSW58, New York City, March 2014. Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown.

FROM 2015 TO 2030: REALIZING GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

The Commission on the Status of Women in the era of the Sustainable Development Goals

During its fifty-fourth session (2015), the Commission laid the groundwork for future close linkages between implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and what would become the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. 66 A component was explicitly added to the Commission's revised methods of work, confirming that the Commission would contribute to the follow-up to the 2030 Agenda so as to accelerate the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of women. 67 The Commission also determined that it would take into consideration possible links between its own future priority themes, the programme of work of the Economic and Social Council and the 2030 Agenda.

In the previous year (2014), the Commission had placed itself in a unique position to contribute to the 2030 Agenda and its follow-up. As the only one among all intergovernmental bodies, it had undertaken a goal-by-goal assessment of the Millennium Development Goals, from a gender perspective. The resulting agreed conclusions clearly diagnosed the reasons for lack of realization of the goals for women and girls. They outlined in detail what would be required to improve outcomes in the post-2015 development agenda, and accelerate the achievement of gender equality, the empowerment of all women and girls, and the realization of their human rights.

Through the agreed conclusions, the Commission urged governments and other stakeholders to take actions in five areas, namely: realizing women's and girls' full enjoyment of all human rights; strengthening the enabling environment for gender equality and the empowerment of women; maximizing investments

in gender equality and the empowerment of women; strengthening the evidence-base for gender equality and the empowerment of women; and ensuring women's participation and leadership at all levels, and strengthening accountability. It acknowledged the role of national machineries for the advancement of women, and contributions made by women's organizations and feminist groups to advancing gender equality.

Confirming its leadership role, the Commission urged Member States to build on the lessons from the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. The Commission called for a transformative and comprehensive approach to shaping the 2030 Agenda, and for a stand-alone goal on gender equality, the empowerment of women and human rights of women and girls, as well as the integration of gender into all goals under the new development framework through their associated targets and indicators.

Gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Immediately following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda by Heads of State and Government in September 2015, the Commission elaborated a detailed roadmap on how to implement it in a gender-responsive manner and to ensure no woman or girl would be left behind. In its 2016 agreed conclusions, ⁶⁹ the Commission spelled out the links between the Sustainable Development Goals and gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. It asserted that the full, effective and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action will make a crucial contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that will leave no one behind, and that

the systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective in its implementation is crucial.

With this substantive result, the Commission not only confirmed its leadership in its area of expertise and responsibility, but also demonstrated its capacity to engage with the new sustainable development framework and its commitment to continuously strengthen and deepen the global normative framework for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. This commitment was further demonstrated in subsequent years when the Commission addressed women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work,70 and the situation of women and girls in rural areas.71 In both instances, the Commission elaborated on the extensive linkages and critical alignment in implementation between the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda.

This synergistic approach has enabled the Commission, since 2016, to provide effective and impactful inputs to the high-level political forum for sustainable development, as called for in the 2030 Agenda. The Commission's priority and review themes for 2019 ensure that the Commission will do so again.⁷²

In an effort to accelerate implementation of commitments, the Commission is fully utilizing methods of work that encourage an interactive approach to its sessions.73 It added a ministerial segment that includes ministerial roundtables and other high-level interactive dialogues to exchange experiences, lessons learned and good practices. The segment also serves to reaffirm and strengthen political commitment for the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as well as their human rights and to ensure high-level engagement in and visibility of the Commission's deliberations. Through the segments and expert panel discussions, the Commission continues to showcase the work of governments, civil society, academia and other stakeholders that contribute to the work on gender equality. At the same time, through the review theme, the Commission has further enhanced the evaluation of progress made through voluntary presentations by Member States.

Between 1996 (fortieth session) when it first used the format of agreed conclusions and 2004 (forty-eighth session), the Commission adopted 19 sets of agreed conclusions. Between 2006 (fiftieth session), when the Commission for the last time had two priority themes on its agenda, and 2018 (sixty-second session), the Commission adopted 11 sets of agreed conclusions, for a total of 30 sets.⁷⁴ After first introducing a review theme in 2006, and further revision to the format in 2015, the Commission has so far heard 35 voluntary presentations by Member States on progress in implementing previous agreed conclusions.

The number of ministers, senior government officials, heads of national mechanisms for gender equality, and NGOs in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council that participate in the Commission's annual sessions has reached unprecedented levels. In addition to the strength of the Commission's substantive outcomes, these levels of participation are further confirmation that it is without doubt the leader of the global movement for gender equality and women's empowerment. It is a place where governments deepen policy commitments and expand the global normative framework; where advocates and activists share good practices and lessons learned in a market place of ideas; and where networks are strengthened and new collaboration initiated.

The Commission has also expanded its catalytic role in gender mainstreaming, as outlined in its methods of work. To this end, it increasingly contributes to the work of other functional commissions and welcomes their contributions to its work. In 2018, for example, the Commission's Chairperson interacted with the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, the Commission on Science and Technology for Development, and the United Nations Forum on Forests, while the Chairperson of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs interacted with the Commission on the Status of Women. Together with the Chairpersons/ Vice-Chairpersons of five subsidiary bodies of the Economic and Social Council, the Commission participated in a panel to contribute to the Council and the High-level Political Forum.

25 years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 2020

The Commission has set in motion the process for a 25-year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. This will take place at its sixty-fourth session, in March 2020. Building on past good practices, the emphasis is on comprehensive national reviews that all States are urged to conduct.⁷⁵ A distinguishing aspect and new opportunity will be the alignment between the Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda to achieve greater impacts and results for women and girls, especially at the national level.

The Commission has recommended that the General Assembly convene a one-day, high-level meeting in the margins of the general debate at its seventy-fifth session in September 2020, aimed at mobilizing actions to accelerate the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

Scenes from the closing of CSW62 as Member States reach agreed conclusions, held at UN Headquarters in New York, 23 March 2018. Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown.

Conclusion

Throughout its over 70 years of existence and its 62 sessions, the Commission on the Status of Women has consistently advocated for the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of women and enjoyment of their human rights, in an effort to realize the substantive equality of all women and girls, everywhere. It has been instrumental in expanding recognition of women's rights, documenting the reality of women's lives throughout the world, shaping global policies on gender equality and the empowerment of women, and ensuring that all aspects of the work of the United Nations incorporate a gender perspective.

In the era of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, and all States' commitment to leave no one behind and reach those furthest behind first, the Commission has confirmed its leadership role in strengthening, deepening and expanding the global normative framework for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and monitoring agreed actions. Governments and civil society value the Commission as a unique space that brings together diverse stakeholders with one common end: equality for all women and girls, everywhere.



ENDNOTES

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- 29 General Assembly resolution 3520, 15 December 1975.
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- 64 Economic and Social Council resolutions 2005/27, 2010/27 and 2015/27.
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- 69 "Women's empowerment and the link to sustainable development," available <u>here</u>, extracted from the report of the Commission on the Status of Women on its sixtieth session (E/2016/27).
- 70 The agreed conclusions on "Women's empowerment in the changing world of work", available here, extracted from the report of the Commission on the Status of Women on its sixty-first session (E/2017/27).
- 71 The agreed conclusions on "Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls", available here, extracted from the report of the Commission on the Status of Women on its sixty-second session (E/2018/27).
- 72 The priority theme is "Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls." The review theme is "Women's empowerment and the link to sustainable development" (agreed conclusions of the sixtieth session).
- 73 Economic and Social Council resolution 2015/6.
- 74 Twice, in 2003 and 2012, the Commission did not reach consensus and thus was unable to reach agreed conclusions.
- 75 Economic and Social Council resolution 2018/8.

UN WOMEN IS THE UN ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN. A GLOBAL CHAMPION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS, UN WOMEN WAS ESTABLISHED TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON MEETING THEIR NEEDS WORLDWIDE.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities: Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems; Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy; All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence; Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.



Planet 50-50 by 2030 Step It Up for Gender Equality

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