



THE UN CONVENTION FOR WOMEN: IS IT WORKING?

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Here I am again, my annual pilgrimage to Ottawa, when I spoil your lunch by talking about our messy world. Down at the UN in New York, I used to be proud to be a Canadian, but now I wonder. The Great Satan to our south has come up shining with a black president who straddles Washington and Nairobi, who not only reads books but has even written a couple. And what do we have in Ottawa? It looks like something left over after the last dance. When will the music begin again? We have ten provincial players in our orchestra, but who is the conductor? Where is Canada?

Maybe it is our women who will save us, our VOW (Voice of Women) is strong and articulate. But as for me, what are my credentials? To begin with, I had three sisters. I came number two, sandwiched between Muriel and Betty. Now those two have gone, and I am left with the youngest, Trudie. All my sisters were smart and literate. Trudie still gobbles up books from the Windsor library.

I said I was number two, but actually I was number three. My mother's first born, little George, lived only five days. But for my mother, little George never died. It is hard to compete with a dead brother. The best I could do was to write a poem to him, so here it is:

LITTLE GEORGE

Dead beat DOA, that's my brother,
first born to my mother, labor lost,
buried in her keep. She could weep
behind her Christian joy: little George,
five days to his death, Gethsemane .

We had to make him up, he became
family fiction. But for littler mother
it was something else, intimate
and private, her golden boy. For me,
afflicted with three sisters, little George

was rival and companion. Betrayed, abandoned,
a shadow of my brother, I await
the day that I will rise to his perfection.

I remember well how disappointed I was when my third sister was born. Up there in the missionary compound in Chengdu, I said to my parents, "Let's turn her in for a pig." No such luck, Trudie lives on.

Just over two weeks ago, here in Ottawa, our UN Association organized a celebration of International Women's Day, on the fifth of March. No doubt many of you were there. That day was a long time in coming; and in the big world, today, has it really arrived? I tell myself, yes, my sisters are my brothers, but I wonder how free we are from where are, in our time and place.

We are born into our nation's culture, whatever it may be. I say culture, but what do we mean by culture? My authority on that subject is the great anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, who milked his time in Bali. My milky way was Chengdu, up at the headwaters of the Yangtze, born into a community of Canadian missionaries. No, they were not Bible thumpers; they founded a good university which is still going.

My father was third generation Irish Protestants, good farmers who produced a Prime Minister and a Nobel Laureate. My mother came from upper-class Rosedale in Toronto. Her older brother was the Wood in Wood-Gundy, now swallowed up in our banking system

Carried away in the tide of Christian evangelism, my parents met in Chengdu. They had to go back to Toronto for a proper Rosedale marriage.

So what is my own native culture? What do I mean by culture? It has to be my unconscious identity, I am who I am without knowing it. I was born into a macho culture, the Judeo-Christian worship of the Father God, a culture shared with Islam. My whole generation was stuck there: Adam's rib, Moses on the Mountain and Jesus on the Cross. Yes, there were a couple of Marys, but they had only bit parts in the drama – the story was about the Father God who killed his son.

So what is this United Nations, where do I come in? Having spent my childhood in China made me aware of the fact that there is more to the world than Canada. As we fled Chengdu in 1926 when warlords kept invading and ransacking the city, this Bowles family settled in rural Ontario where my father took Jesus back to the farm. And there in his little church, in my adolescence, I organized a model League of Nations. You are Albania, I said to one young farm boy. Where the hell is Albania?

And so, surviving the Great War and university, I stumbled into the United Nations. I arrived there by a fluke. I had a job that was paying my way through a Ph.D. UNICEF had just begun, a temporary band-aid operation for children. So I was hired and put on the China desk in fledgling UNICEF. Children and their mothers, women and children,

were my flock. It was basic survival, food and clothing. No time to think about what lay ahead.

Survival went on and on, so there I was, wondering what next? The next turned out to be the United Nations, launched in June 1945. The next year, 1946, UNICEF came to be under the UN skirts. The League of Nations died because the Great Satan stayed outside. The UN lives on because the five Great War allies, including the Great Satan, came in.

Is the UN democratic? Decisions by the Security Council, with its five permanent and ten elected members, are binding on all 192 members of the organization. Developing countries have ganged up to break this stranglehold, but so far they have gone nowhere, in large part because of squabbling among themselves.

The United Nations Charter is an historic document and I invite you to read it again. The Charter begins by setting out the purposes of the UN, which include (and I quote) “promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion...” (Article I:3) Some of these words are a bit obsolete. Today instead of race we would say ethnicity; and instead of sex we would say gender. The words change but the meaning is the same.

My reverend father always based his Sunday sermon on a word in the Bible. My talk to you today is based on a word in the UN Charter. That word is sex , which we now call gender .

The UN Charter has been elaborated in a series of treaties that constitute international law, law that is further defined by the way it is applied. This is an ongoing process which is dramatically illustrated in what sex, or gender, is coming to mean. The following material is taken from my book, [The Diplomacy of Hope: The United Nations Since the Cold War](#).

WOMEN: THE WHOLE WORLD IN THEIR HANDS?

The story of women at the UN is the story of an ongoing revolution, a celebration of women as the engine of social progress. Here you can see a world-wide women's movement infiltrating the corridors of power, demolishing the macho myth that so often has kept men and women in mutual bondage.

When joining the UN, states make a formal commitment to the UN Charter. The Charter is explicit in affirming the equality of men and women. The Preamble affirms faith in the equal rights of women and men, and Article 55 says “the United Nations shall promote... respect for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.” For the UN itself, Article 8 is even more explicit: “The United Nations shall place no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate in any capacity and under conditions of equality in its principal and subsidiary organs.”

This formal affirmation of women's standing in the world was no accident. Among delegates to the UN founding conference, a handful of women from Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, China, Canada and the USA, together succeeded in getting these catalytic words into the Charter. The voice of women was also heard from 42 NGO's at the Conference. Not surprising nevertheless is the fact that among 160 who signed the Charter only four were women. Of the 51 original states in the UN, only 30 had equal voting rights for women.

These few women at the UN's birth were in the forefront of international women's action going back to the 19th century in Europe and North America. At the Hague Peace Conference in 1902, women's organizations pressed for international standards for marriage, divorce, and child custody. Women were aghast at the futile bloodshed of the First World War; and out of that came the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Jane Addams, the first President of WILPF, got the Nobel Peace Prize. On into the 20th century, in developing countries heroic women joined the fight for independence from colonial rule, while at the same time struggling for their own emancipation.

We continue to learn that individuals can make a difference. The US Delegation at the start-up of the General Assembly in 1946 included Eleanor Roosevelt, widow of the late US President. With 15 other women in attendance, Mrs. Roosevelt presented an open letter to the Assembly and to the women of the world, advocating stronger participation of women in international and national life, especially in building peace. Mrs. Roosevelt went on to play a key role in the UN adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Yet until today only two women have been elected President of the General Assembly: Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (sister of Jawaharlal Nehru) of India in 1953, and Angie Brooks of Liberia in 1969. Both women were politically prominent in their own countries.

Fine words and a few outstanding women. But symbols can ignite action. Social and political action must be organized and structured. The UN Charter held no special arrangement for the women's movement, so something had to be created. That something was the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), established in June 1946, a breakout from the Commission on Human Rights. Although human rights are women's rights, anyone could see that the women's cause had to have a distinct and separate push. The CSW was handed an enormous, open-ended task, to inform and advise members of the UN on the whole spectrum of women's rights, social, economic and political. The CSW is mandated to alert the UN to problems facing women and to "recommend" action nationally and internationally on women's rights. These recommendations should include the need to translate commitments in international treaties into laws and regulations back home.

CSW membership started at 15, rising to 45 in 1989 as overall UN membership grew. The work of this Commission has been enriched by the varied professional qualifications of its members. Early on, the first director of the UN Division of Human Rights, John Humphrey, said: "More perhaps than in any other UN body, the delegates of the CSW

were personally committed to its objectives and acted as a kind of lobby for the women of the world.” Over the years, many women's organizations (now over 600) have made important contributions to the work of the CSW.

When the CSW began, very little objective information was available on the situation of women worldwide. To fix this, one of its first actions was to launch what became an annual survey of the legal status and treatment of women. Initial returns from 74 states in 1947 showed that women had full political rights in fewer than one-third of these countries. Subsequent reports confirmed that illiteracy was much higher among women than men. The data in these annual reports showed up glaring discrimination against women and gave grounds for corrective action.

During its first 15 years, 1946 on, the CSW put this information to work as it set standards for women's rights (e.g. in protection, marriage, education, employment and politics). The Organization of American States (OAS) in 1948 adopted the landmark Inter-American Convention on the Granting of Rights to Women. This was extended worldwide when the UN General Assembly in 1952 adopted the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, providing that women have full rights to vote, to run for election, and to serve in any public function. For the first time in human history, universal women's political rights were established in international law. We all know that laws often are ignored, whether national or international; and so, to show up actual practice, the CSW got the UN General Assembly in 1967 to adopt the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

In the next 20 years, a whole battery of international conventions on human rights came into force. Among these was the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, adopted in 1979, turning the 1967 Declaration into law. The Convention defines discrimination as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex” that in any way limits women's rights. Like other human rights conventions, this anti-discrimination Convention is monitored by a committee (23 members) who examine national reports on what is being done to put the Convention into practice. The Committee has focused on the high incidence of violence against women, leading to action by the whole UN General Assembly. The UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has also swung into action, giving aid to more than 70 countries for specific programmes to curb such violence. Says Norleen Heyzer, head of UNIFEM: “We need a world community that is committed to ending violence against women because we know how to do it.”

This Convention was strengthened in 1999 by a Protocol that created a channel for abused women to appeal to an international body. This is at least the beginning of international monitoring of women's rights.

In the 1960s newly independent ex-colonial states infused the UN with a sensitivity to economic and social deprivation in these vast populations. And so the CSW extended its concerns from political to economic, to the advancement of women in poor nations. This outreach of the CSW was energized by the realization that women make a huge

contribution to national wealth, not only in the family but also in conventionally recognized production: in agriculture, industry and commerce. These facts were made plain in definitive studies that could not be discounted. Women were everywhere in the marketplace.

The maturing of the CSW was evident when the UN designated 1975 as the Year of the Woman, and went on to make 1976-85 the UN Decade for Women. In 1975 also the UN launched in Mexico City the first World Conference on Women. Delegates from 133 governments came to Mexico, and a parallel citizen's "Tribune" brought together over 6000 activists from around the world. A "Plan of Action" addressed social, economic and political rights. The Conference was a political event that men at the UN could not ignore.

Obviously nation states must do the work of turning international norms into practice. At the core of all this, what could the UN do? Backstopping the CSW was the UN Division for the Advancement of Women, servicing the Commission's work and speaking up for women internationally and inside the UN house. To move out of the house into concrete action, two things were done: the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was established in 1976; and at the same time the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women was conceived. Led by its farsighted and pragmatic first director, Margaret Snyder, UNIFEM got special staff into UN regional offices, organized training and planning workshops and gave direct aid to women's action in poor communities including the start-up of women's own businesses. It influenced major UN funds such as UNDP and the World Bank, and inter-governmental organizations such as the Southern African Development Community, to include and involve both women and men in all their activities. From this fresh beginning, UNIFEM continues today under Norleen Heyzer with voluntary contributions amounting to about \$25 million a year. Working in over 100 countries and with advisors in 40, UNIFEM gives financial and technical support to getting women into political life and getting them out of poverty. UNIFEM works the whole UN system and NGOs' networks to promote economic and social justice for women.

Problems and aspirations raised at Mexico needed more thought, more probing. Hence three more World Conferences were held: in Copenhagen 1980, in Nairobi 1985 and in Beijing 1995. Numbers say something. The 1975 Conference attracted 133 governments and over 6,000 from NGOs; in 1980, 145 governments and over 7,000 NGOs; in 1985, 157 governments and 15,000 from NGOs; and in 1995, 189 governments and 17,000 from NGOs.

Conferences, declarations, strategies, plans. Has anything substantial and practical, nationally and internationally, come out of all these gatherings? Was this more than global tourism for NGOs? Let us trace the formal outcomes of these conferences and consider what that says about how the basic issues are understood. Are women in the UN Club or aren't they? And if in, on what conditions? And what does this mean for women desperate in poverty and in war?

At Mexico City, the Conference set a precedent by defining goals in a World Plan of Action for the UN Decade for Women. Major goals were equality, development, and peace. The Plan of Action emphasized access to basic services -- education, health, nutrition, housing, family planning -- all pretty traditional; but, more importantly, it said women must also become active participants in political life and in social and economic growth.

Five years later at Copenhagen, with the recent adoption of the Convention on eliminating discrimination against women, the big question was: why are women denied their rights? The answer to such a fundamental question, identified at this Conference, seems pretty obvious; but it also tells us why it is necessary to have such a formal legal Convention at all. Women were denied rights for various reasons: little political interest or drive to promote women's standing in society, hardly any women in power establishments, the devaluation of women's manifold contributions to society, weak support services (e.g., day care for tiny tots, financial credit for women entrepreneurs), as well as women's isolation and lack of resources to move ahead. The Convention put pressure on governments to apply international standards in their own legislation which, in most countries, is very weak. Practical measures advocated in the Copenhagen program included women's rights to own, control and inherit property, their rights to child custody, and their right to a legal national identity. Having to claim those rights tells a lot about how women have suffered.

At the third conference, in Nairobi in 1985, it was time to make a first assessment of the Decade for Women, and to work out an itinerary for the next stretch. The UN had checked around and found that practically nothing was happening to meet the Copenhagen goals. There had to be a shift in direction, in strategy. Getting women and their concerns into the power establishments had to come first, and what that meant had to be spelled out. The Nairobi strategies took another ten-year look, up to the year 2000, beginning with a radical challenge -- all rights are women's rights. Nairobi proclaimed that, while society must support and protect women, society also needs women, not as objects of charity but as gifted partners in shaping a better world. Women's full partnership must be assured in law, and in economic, social and political practice. The Nairobi strategies identified specific areas where women must be involved, including not only social services (e.g., health and education) but also science, the environment, industry, employment, and the new realm of communications. Widespread conflict in Africa could hardly be ignored, and Nairobi stressed women's capacity to promote peace.

The Beijing Conference in 1995 took the seminal insight of Nairobi, that women are essential partners in every dimension of national life, and built a new Declaration and Platform for action on that base. Because marginalized, women need specific political support, not as a sort of society unto themselves, but as welcome and gifted celebrants at the head table of life. Women and men will join hands. To carry this transforming approach into social reality, the Platform for Action identified 12 critical issues for women:

- Poverty
- Education and Training
- Health
- Violence
- Armed conflict
- The economy
- Power, decision-making
- Institutional support
- Human rights
- The media
- The environment
- Girls' special needs

The Beijing consensus – women speaking with one voice – was approved that same year by the UN General Assembly. Here was a UN programme for the twenty-first century.

A surge of energy into the women's movement came from UN concerns over population and family planning. For many years the UN has led the world in its demographic statistics and population projections. To assist countries in their population programmes, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) was created in 1969, supported by voluntary contributions outside the regular UN budget. Following international population conferences in Budapest (1974) and Mexico (1980), the UN convened a major Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, just one year before the Beijing women's conference. How did these two meetings converge? Cairo, too, formulated a plan. While stressing the link between population and national growth, their plan took the same broad approach to women and their families as Beijing a year later. Women need to be empowered so that they can have a say in running their countries and running their lives; they need jobs and income, they need literacy education, they need maternal and child health services. The 179 States that were at Cairo turned up a year later in Beijing. And all of this was funnelled to the General Assembly. How refreshing to get the same advice from different sources! In special sessions, the GA affirmed its continuing commitment to the Cairo plan in 1999, and to the Beijing Platform in 2000.

The five-year review of Beijing was done in New York from 5 to 9 June 2000. The GA was given a detailed report on accomplishments and obstacles. For most of the 12 issues, it is not feasible to set quantitative targets, especially targets that would fit all countries. The review therefore had to be made in general terms, illustrated by specific cases. What emerged was a story of slow advance in most areas, not surprising since fundamental changes in orientation and institutions would have to happen. What we see is work in slow progress.

These declarations and plans of action are expressive of principle (what is right) and of intent (what should be done). They should carry political weight and lead to formal legal and institutional action. Meanwhile, there is international law to buttress the women's conferences: the basic human rights conventions, elaborated in the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, strengthened by its 1999

Protocol. By the time of the Millennium Summit (September 2000), 166 governments had ratified the Conventions, and 15 had ratified the Protocol. The Convention is the women's international bill of rights, providing for their equal enjoyment of civil, political, social, and cultural rights. What the Protocol does is to establish a way for abused women to appeal to the international committee that checks on countries' behaviour – are they doing what they said they would do when they embraced this Convention? This Committee, made up of 23 independent experts from around the world, operates like several other treaty committees: it examines national reports in open meetings, critiques country performance, and identifies general problems, e.g., female genital mutilation (so-called female circumcision), violence against women and women's health. The appeals are likely to give information too disturbing to get into national reports. This is a remarkable way of learning and evaluating what is happening, and then channeling the worst-case findings to the top UN legislative body, the General Assembly. At its 55th Session in the year 2000, for example, the GA took a formal stand, a resolution, expressing deep concern over the persistence of violence and crimes against women throughout the world, urging all states to make such violence a crime punishable by law, and urging states to put an end to these criminal activities.

Wartime is the worst time for women. In today's armed struggles, 90 percent of casualties are women and children. Sexual exploitation of women, rape as genocide, is high among war crimes under international law. For the first time ever, perpetrators of crimes like these have been prosecuted and convicted by the War Crimes Tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda. These ad hoc Tribunals have been succeeded by the permanent International Criminal Court. Crimes under the Court's jurisdiction include:

- As war crimes and crimes against humanity, rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy or sterilization.
- As genocide, prevention of births in a targeted group.

The Security Council has opened its doors and its mind to the concerns of women. On 24 and 25 October, 2000 the Council held open meetings on Women, Peace and Security. Besides formal presentations by governments and UN organizations, the Council heard from NGOs and citizen organizations in war-torn societies. On 31 October, the Council passed a bold and comprehensive resolution, endorsing the Beijing approach, demanding protection of women and girls in armed conflict and urging that women be brought into peacemaking and into UN peace operations. The Security Council said it would keep track of what happens and asked the Secretary-General to report back, specifically on what war does to women and girls, and what women can do to restore and maintain peace.

How are women faring within the UN itself, in the Secretariat? While a lot better than many governments, the UN still has some distance to go in order to reach parity between women and men on its staff. During the 1990's the percentage of women with professional responsibilities rose from 28 to 39, and, within that group, the percentage having managerial responsibilities rose from 7 to 31. In-house, some of the old boys still

need reassurance that women won't eat them up. They can be comforted by the cheerful competence and good sense of the Deputy Secretary-General, Louise Fréchette.

And then there was the Millennium Summit. In the UN diplomatic community, only 11 ambassadors were women. Although eight governments or states were headed by women, only three were at the Summit : Helen Clark of New Zealand , Vaira Vike-Freiberga of Latvia , and Tarja Halonen of Finland . Madam Halonen was co-chair of the Summit. On 5 September 2000 these three women leaders met with UN women executives, including six heads of UN programs, to agree on what to say to the mostly male Summit. What they said, in sum, was:

- Put more women into peacekeeping and peacebuilding.
- Enable women to fight poverty – give them better education, better health, access to credit.
- Get women into government at all levels.
- Besides raising women to parity with men in the UN staff, governments should place more women as their ambassadors at the UN

Although what came out of the Summit, the Declaration, was not saturated with gender insight, key references were there:

- In values and principles, “the equal rights of women and men must be assured”.
- In human rights, combat all forms of violence against women.
- In development and poverty eradication, equal access to all levels of education for girls and boys; also, “promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable.”

The words are there, our hope for a richer and more compassionate world.

So that is the story about women at the United Nations. Returning to my personal story, I am proud of the fact that my godfather, the Honourable N.W. Rowell, led the way to the enfranchisement of Canadian women. In 1912, our Supreme Court in Ottawa ruled that women could not be appointed to the Senate. My godfather appealed that ruling, and took the case to the Privy Council in London. The Privy Council overruled the Canadian Court and opened the door for women.

N.W. Rowell was a great statesman, a leader in religion and politics. His life ended tragically with a stroke. He stayed alert but could not speak. That was how I found him when I last saw him.

I used to play football with his son. We tossed the ball back and forth in the Rowell's back yard. I say back yard, but it was one of those elegant Rosedale estates. My farewell accomplishment was to toss the ball through the window into their living room.

