

i TIME FOR A CHANGE



Understanding the universe of gender relations, which vary enormously from culture to culture, is no easy task. But it must be done. And it must be done by having men and women sitting as equals at the table. . . . No society can realize its potential while repressing the talents of half its people. Isn't it time for a change?

—*James Gustave Speth, Administrator,
United Nations Development Program*

For millennia women have dedicated themselves almost exclusively to the task of nurturing, protecting and caring for the young and the old, striving for the conditions of peace that favor life as a whole. It is time to apply in the arena of the world the wisdom and experience that women have gained.

—*Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Laureate,
keynote speaker, opening plenary*

A History of United Nations Women's Conferences

Janice Auth

The struggle for women's rights as part of the agenda of the United Nations began in 1947 with the establishment of its Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), a legacy of the energetic presence of Eleanor Roosevelt.*

By proclamation of the UN General Assembly (GA), 1975 was designated as International Women's Year (IWY). The first intergovernmental conference on women was held in Mexico City from June 16 through July 2, 1975. Most of the delegates to this first conference were men, and the number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) represented was very small. The themes of this IWY world conference were equality, development, and peace. Two documents emerged from the deliberations of the two thousand government delegates: *Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and their Contribution to Development and Peace* and *World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of International Women's Year*. In October 1975 the United Nations declared 1976–85 a Decade for Women.

The second conference, held in Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14–29, 1980, marked the midpoint in this decade. The World Conference of the UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development, and Peace added three subthemes to the agenda: education, employment, and health. The goal of this conference was to assess progress made since the first world conference and to outline actions to be taken during the second half of the Decade for Women. The document adopted at this conference was the *Program of Action*.

From July 15 to July 26, 1985, the UN convened a final Decade for Women World Conference in Nairobi. With equality, development, and

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peace as the primary themes and education, employment, and health as the subthemes, the delegates attending the world conference to review and appraise the achievement of the UN Decade for Women adopted the *Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000*, which, it was hoped, would renew commitments to furthering women's issues.

The proposal to have an International Women's Year was first put before the UN General Assembly by a women's nongovernmental organization, the Women's International Democratic Federation. And NGOs have been at the forefront of activities throughout the IWY and the Decade for Women that followed.

June 16 to July 2, 1975, in Mexico City, six thousand women (and a few men) participated in the IWY tribune, the parallel nongovernmental meeting organized by an NGO planning committee. The three themes of IWY—equality, development, and peace—served as the focal point for daily plenary sessions. In addition, workshops were held—one hundred planned by the committee, one hundred spontaneous—covering a multitude of issues ranging from rural women's small businesses to the training of women astronauts. In keeping with its original intentions, the IWY tribune did not issue any declarations. It did, however, open up new possibilities for action and gave birth to new programs and organizations.

From July 14 to July 28, 1980, in Copenhagen, concurrent to the convening of the UN world conference, ten thousand women and again some men attended a parallel NGO forum. The forum's themes were the same as those of the world conference, but participants also discussed countless other issues, such as female sexual slavery, wages for housework, feminism, appropriate technology, women's studies, and much more. As with the 1975 IWY tribune, the NGO forum did not issue declarations but did contribute to a growing international women's movement and to the development of new networks worldwide.

From July 10 to July 19, 1985, the parallel meeting to the UN world conference in Nairobi, Forum 85, was held at the University of Nairobi. An estimated fifteen thousand people took part in plenary sessions, workshops (this time more than fourteen hundred), demonstrations, ex-

hibitions, and discussion groups that included such special events as tech and tools, an international film and video festival, a peace tent, and a crafts bazaar. Issues at Forum 85 included those on the agenda at the UN world conference plus many more, such as women, law, and development; lesbian rights and research issues; and women in arts and music. Forum 85 did not issue formal declarations but did provide the stimulus for dozens of new organizations and networks, and it gave an international platform for feminist perspectives and women's approaches to a variety of issues.

The goal of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women and the NGO forum was to "bring together women and men to challenge, create, and transform global structures and processes at all levels through the empowerment and celebration of women."

This fourth in the series of UN conferences on women was the largest gathering ever held under the auspices of the United Nations. The total number of people registered for the official conference was 16,921, including delegates, NGO representatives, and media representatives. Action for equality, development, and peace was the theme of the conference held in Beijing September 4–15, 1995. Delegates from 189 countries adopted the Platform for Action (see "Bringing Beijing Home" in part VI and "A Summary of the Platform for Action" in appendix D).

Look at the world through women's eyes was the theme of the NGO forum that met in Huairou, China, August 30–September 8, 1995. An estimated 40,000 people participated in more than three thousand workshops, demonstrations, cultural presentations, plenary sessions, and informal discussion groups. It was a place of learning, lobbying, networking, and celebrating.

The four UN conferences on women and the attendant nongovernmental organization gatherings have kept alive over the past twenty years a continuously evolving awareness of the condition of the world's women. Each succeeding event has unfolded upon the recommendations and actions of the previous ones. Beijing was the culmination of that process of unfoldment so far. But Beijing was also a beginning:

Securing the equality of women and men, in law and in fact, is the great political project of the twentieth century. A crucial role in the realization of that project has been entrusted to the United Nations. . . . We are meeting to take that great enterprise forward into the twenty-first century and beyond: to consolidate the legal advance, to build on the political understandings, and to commit ourselves to action. (UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali)

The Significance of the UN World Women's Conferences

Margaret E. Galey

The advancement of women worldwide is one of the great success stories of the United Nations.¹ That success has resulted from the efforts by the UN Commission on the Status of Women and the four world women's conferences in fostering international collaboration and agreement among governments on a range of international measures to advance women's status. In addition, the four UN world women's conferences—the World Conference on International Women's Year (1975), the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women (1980), the World Conference to Review and Appraise the UN Decade for Women (1985), and the Fourth World Conference (1995)—have also provided the occasion for convening unofficial parallel nongovernmental organization (NGO) forums. These NGO forums facilitate individual and group contacts across geographic boundaries and spur new international networks and NGOs. Local communities like Pittsburgh have become involved in these international conferences mainly through their participation in the NGO forums. But in Beijing, local community groups were permitted to send a representative to the official meeting. Thus members of the Pittsburgh/Beijing '95 and Beyond project were able to participate in the transnational event—the NGO forum—as well as the conference of governments.

In considering the significance of these conferences, recall that sovereign states are no longer the sole actors in international relations. They share the world stage with an increasing number of international institutions as well as NGOs. The increasingly complex relations between and among these entities cause scholars to distinguish intergovernmental from transnational relations. The latter—contacts, coalitions, and interactions across geographic boundaries not controlled by the central foreign policy organs of government—have spurred the growth of international networks and NGOs such as multinational corporations, global

religious societies, international foundations, and women's international associations. Nongovernmental organizations also influence official governmental and intergovernmental activity and are influenced by it. Reciprocal influence characterizes relations between and among transnational organizations and governments in contemporary world politics.²

Also recall that prior to the UN's establishment in 1945, the women's movement was primarily a transnational phenomenon and had not yet become a priority for intergovernmental attention. Starting with the era of the French Revolution, private associations of women began to form. By the middle of the nineteenth century, associations of women suffragists, temperance workers, teachers, college graduates, nurses, peace workers, social workers, and labor officials formed national, then international associations. The leaders of these associations convened international meetings and congresses in capital cities of North America and Western Europe to develop common agendas and strategies to influence governments and international institutions to improve women's condition. For instance, in 1919 in Paris, the French National Women's Suffrage Alliance sponsored a gathering of representatives of women's organizations to develop goals and strategies to influence the Paris Peace Conference. Representatives met with the Big Four and persuaded them to incorporate into the League of Nations covenant a reference to women in relation to the International Labor Organization and the League Secretariat. Another example is important: American women suffragists, after winning the vote in 1920, traveled to Latin America to help Latin women organize to seek their political rights. Latin and American women later pressed for the creation of the Inter-American Commission on Women within the Pan American Union. Subsequently, Latin members of the Commission worked to influence the San Francisco Conference to incorporate the phrase "without distinction as to race, sex, nationality or religion" as part of the human rights provisions in the UN Charter. Then at the UN's first session in 1946, these same Latin women joined with women leaders from Denmark and France to influence government representatives in the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to establish first the subcommission and a year later the Commission on the Status of Women.³ This intergovernmental commission, with its initial member-

ship of fifteen women appointed by governments, would be the focal point for women within the United Nations, their efforts to advance their situation, the source of initiative for the world conferences, and a main vehicle for implementing conference decisions.

I. Significance of the Conferences: Governments and Intergovernmental Relations

The involvement of governments in the advancement of women, including in the world women's conferences, has come about through decisions by governments in international intergovernmental organizations, notably the United Nations and its Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The commission is an intergovernmental body whose members are appointed by governments. Its aims, amended in 1947, have been to prepare recommendations for ECOSOC on promoting women's rights in political, economic, civil, social, and educational fields with the aim of implementing the principle that men and women should have equal rights.⁴ Since 1946, CSW's contribution to the advancement of women worldwide has included the preparation of four conventions that articulate women's international human rights. One addresses political rights of women; a second, the nationality of married women; and a third, the consent to marriage and the registration of marriages. The fourth is the comprehensive Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The UN's Commission on the Status of Women has also prepared principles on equal parental rights and duties and made recommendations on inheritance, property ownership, traditional practices, equal pay, pension and retirement plans, and education at all levels. They have encouraged the UN specialized agencies to advance women's issues. For example, they urged the World Health Organization (WHO) through ECOSOC to end the practice of female circumcision in the early 1950s; the International Labor Organization (ILO) to establish standards on equal employment opportunities for women; and the UN Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to improve access of women and girls to education. In cooperation with the specialized agencies, CSW members also prepared a long-term program for the advancement of women in development, which the UN

General Assembly endorsed in 1970. This became the basis for CSW's recommendations concerning women and development.⁵

In the early 1970s, the General Assembly began sponsoring global conferences of governments on the human environment (1972), food (1974), and population (1974). As a result of this intergovernmental activity, governments began to recognize that women were not only child bearers but also initial and principal educators of children, major producers and preparers of food, and custodians for the household and the health and well-being of the family. This perception of women's role led governments to begin to recognize the salience of women's issues.

The Commission on the Status of Women hastened to secure this new recognition and offered two proposals. One called on UN members to commemorate International Women's Year (IWY) in 1975. It was introduced by the Finnish member of CSW upon the urging of an NGO, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The other, proposed by the U.S. member, called for a world conference of governments to commemorate the International Women's Year. UN member governments in CSW, ECOSOC, and the General Assembly agreed to both proposals.

The first historic UN women's conference, the World Conference of International Women's Year (IWY), held in Mexico City in June 1975, highlighted the year-long commemoration of IWY. Delegations from 133 governments attended it and approved a world plan of action and recommended, among other measures, the UN Decade for the Advancement of Women as well as a second world conference in 1980. In Copenhagen, 143 government delegations attended the Conference of the Mid-Decade for Women, endorsed the controversial Program of Action, and recommended a third conference in 1985. The third world conference, held in Nairobi, Kenya, with 149 government delegations, approved the major conference document, *Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000*. The fourth conference was postponed from 1990 to 1995 in order for CSW to gain ECOSOC approval for annual commission sessions starting in 1988. These were judged essential to manage an expanding program. In 1995 in Beijing, China, delegations from 189 governments gathered to discuss and approve the Beijing Dec-

laration and Platform of Action.⁶ This, the largest conference ever sponsored by the United Nations, then observing its fiftieth anniversary, symbolized the steady expansion of the international women's movement.

Whether called the plan of action or program or platform of action, each major document resulting from each world women's conference has identified a set of goals (equality, development, and peace), strategies to achieve those goals, and recommended action to be undertaken by governments, international institutions, NGOs, and individuals to advance women's status. In these respects, the action plans reflect international public policies negotiated and endorsed by an increasing number of UN member governments. The adoption and subsequent reaffirmation of successive plans with similar, if not identical goals and action recommendations helps legitimate the advancement of women on the agendas of the UN and its specialized agencies and programs and all of its member governments.

But there are several related points of significance. One concerns preparations for a world conference. Each government must develop a national report describing policies and laws that support the advancement of women within its society and progress made since the previous report. In addition, governments also develop official positions on the principal themes, recommended actions, and issues within the draft conference document to be discussed at the conference itself. In developing national positions, the government agency authorized to act as lead agency may have to resolve differing, even conflicting views within the bureaucracy if the government is intended to speak with one voice internationally. Preparing national positions for the conference as well as the government's participation in the conference is likely to sensitize government personnel to the issues under discussion and raise consciousness about those issues, a matter discussed below.

Another point of significance concerns the government delegation. Each government is invited by the UN secretary-general to send a delegation to the conference. In contrast to other UN conferences, the World Women's Conferences have encouraged governments to appoint women to serve as representatives whether as heads or members of government delegations. Most women heads of delegations have been appointed by

male presidents or prime ministers since only twenty-four women have been elected head of state since 1900. A few of these women, however, have led their government's delegation to these world conferences. Examples include Benazir Bhutto, Indira Gandhi, and Gro Bruntland. Several daughters of presidents, such as Maureen Reagan, or wives of presidents or prime ministers, such as Hillary Clinton, Jihan Sadat, and Leah Rabin have headed their government delegations. Delegation heads appoint members from government ministries of education, social affairs, foreign affairs, health and welfare, and if they exist, special offices or bureaus on women and children's affairs and from parliament and key NGOs.

A related point of significance concerns women representing governments. As members of national delegations, women participate in inter-governmental political processes of the world conferences within the framework of a conference agenda, rules of procedure, and organized committee meetings and plenary sessions as well as any government instructions for particular positions on issues before the conference. Delegation heads report to the conference on progress in their countries, discuss and articulate national positions and policies on women's status, and negotiate differences on positions to achieve commonly agreed upon recommendations for action in the conference document. Such participation helps raise awareness of the process of world politics and women's issues. Women engage in diplomacy and world politics, professional fields traditionally restricted to men. This is not to say that women are replacing men as diplomats or international negotiators, but their numbers are increasing. The advent of women officials in world politics has been a significant effect of the conferences.

Finally, brief discussion of the major conference goals, concepts, and themes can help to illustrate another significant aspect of the world conferences, namely the development of women's issues and their linkage with issues on the larger agenda by governments.

Equality

One of the chief aims of CSW—equality—was also a principal theme and goal of International Women's Year and each of the world confer-

ences. From 1946, the notion expanded to cover virtually all spheres of activity. CSW's charge to make recommendations to promote women's rights with the aim of implementing the principle that men and women have equal rights resulted in innumerable recommendations and several conventions. Notably, after preparing conventions on political rights, then consent to marriage, then nationality of married women, and principles of parental rights and duties, CSW members undertook the preparation of the first comprehensive treaty on women's rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Initiated within CSW, endorsed by the 1975 conference, and approved in 1979 by the GA, this convention incorporated provisions of earlier conventions and important resolutions into an international treaty that for the first time defines and prohibits sex discrimination in political, economic, social, civil, and cultural spheres of activity. By October 1997, 161 governments had ratified the convention. A significant exception remains the United States government.

A particularly heinous inequality addressed by the first conference in 1975 was the practice of apartheid. Delegates called for a study of the effects of apartheid on women and children. The report prepared by the secretariat was discussed by CSW and forwarded to the 1980 conference, which underscored the double burden for black women living under apartheid and led to resolutions urging its elimination.

Economic equality, already defined by CSW in terms of access to employment opportunities, equal remuneration, age of retirement, and pensions, was expanded by the women's conferences to include women's need for access to financial credit and bank loans. The conferences also acknowledged women's participation in the informal work sector, their role as food producers and household workers, and their contribution to the gross national product. As major UN collections of data failed to include information on women's work, delegates endorsed the collection of such information for future compendiums and as a basis for policy development.

Besides expanding the concept of women's equality per se, the conferences offered delegates the opportunity to begin linking women's issues with issues on the larger political agenda. One example was women's

linking the call for eliminating apartheid in South Africa with imposing sanctions against South Africa, a position that not all governments agreed upon, but one which gained broad conference support in Copenhagen and Nairobi.

Development

A second major goal of IWY as well as the conferences has been to promote women's access to economic and social development. Concepts of development began to enter into CSW discussions in 1963 when the GA invited CSW to prepare a long-term program for the advancement of women. This program, which addressed women's role in employment, education, community development, civic participation, and family planning, was approved by the GA in 1970. Subsequently, development became a key theme of the IWY and the women's conferences, at which delegates discussed the need for women to be integrated into development. The latter meant equal access to planning and implementing development projects, whether in agriculture, industrial, or service sectors or in educational, health, and family planning services. Women's roles as agricultural workers and food producers was also acknowledged. At each of the conferences, delegates identified special groups of disadvantaged women deserving particular consideration: rural women, migrant women, youth, the disabled and handicapped, and the aging and recommended action to alleviate their plight. By 1980 governments determined the feminization of poverty to be a major trend characterizing women's conditions and offered proposals to end it. Important statistical information needed to chart women's contributions to economic and social development has been gathered and published by the UN secretariat in a number of excellent compendiums, including *Women's Role in Development* and *The World's Women 1995: Trends and Statistics*.⁷

Peace

Peace, a primary goal of the United Nations as well as the women's conferences, has evolved in the last thirty years from the notion of war prevention, arms control, and disarmament to conflict resolution, violence prevention, and the security and dignity of the person. Women del-

legates have contributed to expanding the concept of peace and linked their concerns with traditional and newer definitions of the term.

Several examples are illustrative. First, the Soviet Union initiated in 1978 the "struggling women" declaration, which extolled women's role in the struggle for peace and in promoting arms control and disarmament. The GA approved it in 1982. Second, at the 1975, 1980, and 1985 conferences, delegates linked women's interest in peace with calls for ending civil strife and war in the Middle East, then South Africa and Central America, and still later, the former Yugoslavia. Women's concepts of peace and security have also been linked with humanitarian assistance and intervention. For instance, CSW prepared the Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Armed Conflict. Discussing this at the conferences, delegates have called attention not only to the need to provide protection to women and children but to the fact that the women and children as a result of such conflict constitute the overwhelming number of refugees. Delegates in turn have urged improved treatment of such refugees in camps and increasing voluntary support for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees to provide it.

Third, at the 1980 conference, delegates endorsed a study on violence against women. The resulting report was sent to the 1985 conference for discussion. The conference recommended the preparation of a declaration which was undertaken by CSW in consultation with the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and approved by the GA in 1993.⁸ Besides addressing a widespread and increasingly acknowledged problem women faced throughout the world, this declaration also illustrated an important way in which women delegates have expanded their concern for peace by defining the security of the person to be part of it. Women have also aimed to advance human dignity by seeking to outlaw female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM). As early as the 1950s, CSW had recommended that the World Health Organization take steps to end this practice. Regarding the issue as cultural, not medical, WHO for many years dismissed the request. The Commission on Human Rights then took up the matter and appointed a special rapporteur to study and report action on the subject. This report, available to the 1985 conference, led delegates to

call for eliminating the practice. Global publicity and ongoing pressure led the WHO executive council in 1993 to approve a resolution outlawing its practice.⁹

Two additional examples of ways that women have helped expand the traditional concept of peace are their efforts to have rape defined as a war crime and to ban land mines. Thanks largely to women's voices at the 1993 UN Human Rights Conference, delegates agreed to define rape to be a war crime. The 1995 Beijing Conference affirmed this link and condemned rape. The conference also linked women's efforts to achieve peace to the political problem of eliminating the millions of land mines in the former and existing war zones.

The international intergovernmental UN world women's conferences have been significant for several reasons. They have offered opportunities for women to become informed about national, foreign, and global issues and their linkages with other issues on the larger global agenda. They have meant that governments themselves have had to develop policies and positions on a range of issues addressed by the conferences and to prepare reports to communicate progress made in promoting the advancement of women within their national societies.

II. Significance of the Conference for Transnational Relations

Transnational organizations have played a vital role in advancing women's status. Before the UN was established, the women's movement was primarily a transnational phenomena. Several transnational women's organizations existed, having evolved from earlier local and national organizations. They included the International Council of Women (ICW), the International Alliance of Women, the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, the Countrywomen of the World, the International Young Women's Christian Association, the World Women's Temperance Union, the International Federation of University Women, and the International Association of Nurses. After CSW was established in 1946, these organizations sought accreditation to CSW meetings under UN charter article 71 and ECOSOC rules of procedure. They offered important suggestions orally or in writing, provided support for CSW resolutions submitted to ECOSOC and the GA, and

helped to implement resolutions adopted by CSW by publicizing them within their increasingly large worldwide memberships.

When the UN General Assembly began sponsoring global conferences in the 1970s, these organizations gained official accreditation to attend and to address points of interest in the respective conference documents. Until the early 1990s, only organizations with regional and international membership were permitted to be accredited. Starting with the Rio Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, the conference's secretary-general welcomed and authorized national and local organizations to be accredited to the conference. This practice continued and at the Beijing conference in 1995, enabled representatives of local and national NGOs, such as the Pittsburgh/Beijing '95 and Beyond project, to attend the government conference as well as the NGO forum.

As for NGO forums, when the GA decided to convene the first world women's conference in Mexico City in 1975, it was clear that an organized effort would be necessary to enable thousands of interested individuals and groups not affiliated with the UN to join and participate in the conference. A planning committee for the *Mexico City Tribune*, the unofficial NGO forum, organized the parallel forum in Mexico City. This unofficial conference attracted eight thousand women and men. The NGO forum in Copenhagen registered about twelve thousand participants, and twenty thousand gathered for the week-long NGO forum in Nairobi in 1985. Beijing was the largest conference ever held by the UN. Some forty thousand attended the NGO forum. The increasing numbers of individuals from local, national, regional and international associations who attended the NGO forums participated in organized seminars, workshops, and meetings. They made contacts, interacted with those from other countries and cultures, and built networks of interest and new associations.

The 1975 NGO forum resulted in the establishment of the International Tribune Center and publication of a newsletter, the *Tribune*, circulated to all registered participants. Later, the center published manuals on a range of subjects from sewing and gardening to organizing community groups to help women and girls gain awareness of their role in society. At the NGO forums, new transnational organizations formed such as

the International Women's Rights Action Watch, women's projects within existing human rights groups such as Human Rights Watch and in professional societies such as the International Studies Association and the American Society of International Law.

The exponential increase in the number and types of women's NGOs throughout the world in the last two decades is attributable to the four women's conferences. The new NGOs represent every hue in the ideological rainbow: religious, radical, conservative, grassroots, and elite; local, national, regional, and international. Some provide welfare or development services; others aim to organize women; still others conduct research on women's lives or work, or advocate social or political change. These groups represent a new breed different from the older, well-established women's NGOs that had held consultative status with the UN for decades. Among the new breed is Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), a network of scholars from the developing countries established before the Nairobi conference. The International Women's Tribune Center that grew out of the Mexico City conference was an important, earlier networking effort. In the late 1980s, Bella Abzug masterminded Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO).

Thanks to their experience at the 1975, 1980, and 1985 women's conferences, leaders and members of large numbers of transnational associations worked to influence the major conference document for the Fourth World Conference in Beijing, China. They also sought to influence other UN-sponsored conferences of governments, such as the 1992 World Environment Conference in Rio, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the 1994 Population Conference in Cairo, and the 1995 Social Development Conference in Copenhagen. To this end, they expended their own efforts and held conference preparatory sessions and a daily NGO women's caucus with assistance from WEDO. At Rio, Cairo, and Vienna, the women's caucus met every morning to review negotiations of the previous day and establish advocacy priorities and develop strategies to influence delegates at the government conferences. Each afternoon, the women's caucus shifted its site to the official conference to coordinate efforts between the NGOs and members of the press.

Women's NGOs also worked to organize global campaigns, build coalitions, and prepare policy documents including proposed resolutions, treaties, protocols, and conventions.¹⁰ Already, they have encouraged governments to ratify the various conventions, especially the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

III. Consciousness-Raising at Individual and Group Levels

Implicit in this discussion of the significance of the conferences for intergovernmental and transnational relations has been the effect on individuals and groups who participate in them. Individual participation in intergovernmental and transnational relations may offer consciousness-raising, a learning experience, and/or attitude change. The women's conferences are said to be important consciousness-raising events. Participation in transnational relations is said to promote attitude change. But what does this mean? Whose consciousness is raised, about what, and to what end? What attitudes are changed?

Consciousness-raising may occur at an individual as well as a collective level. For individuals, personal awareness may increase through participation in activities intended to raise consciousness about one or more of the issues women face, whether literacy, education, health, family planning, or employment. The critical element, however, is participation in activities that increase awareness or consciousness, about the nature or cause of the problem that is detrimental to women.¹¹ There is also organizational consciousness, that is, the awareness of the problem by the group and an identification with other women as objects of injustice or discrimination. Collective consciousness-raising is reflected in activities that increase the capacity of women to work together to achieve common goals based on a mutually shared understanding of the problem.¹²

The UN women's conferences and NGO forums have facilitated individual and collective consciousness-raising for several categories of conference participants:

1. The official participants—members of government delegations, accredited representatives of NGOs, including media representatives and secretariat staff.
2. The thousands of unofficial participants—leaders and members of

NGOs as well as interested individuals from an increasing number of UN member states who attend workshops, speakouts, seminars, and briefings at the NGO forums.

3. Those who participate indirectly by providing backup in home government departments where they receive and analyze reporting cables from their conference delegation and send cables with instructions on policy and voting or suggestions about strategy and tactics.

4. The “attentive publics” who participate by reading and discussing press accounts, scrutinizing media coverage of the conferences, and working in their local communities.

All of these participants may experience consciousness-raising. But it is the conference-goers whose awareness of cultural, religious, linguistic, economic, social and political differences and similarities is heightened by participation who are likely to gain increased consciousness. Such increased consciousness also includes awareness of world politics, which inevitably intrudes into conference deliberations, and the UN functions and procedures. Naturally, the extent and effect of individual and collective consciousness-raising will vary from individual to individual and group to group. Yet such consciousness-raising can contribute to attitude change and, in turn, promote social change and transform social structures to eliminate discriminatory laws and practices and promote equality. Historic examples offer perspective on the importance of the UN conferences as consciousness-raising as well as empowering events. Two hundred years ago, amid the French Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft, a writer with extraordinary consciousness of women's conditions authored the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* to help define women's conditions and raise the consciousness of other women.¹³ But women were not yet organized to identify common problems or to mobilize resources to transform the social order. Generally, they joined with men to transform the corrupt French monarchy into a representative government that granted male citizens their rights. Roughly one hundred years later, in the 1880s, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who had organized the first women's conference in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, created with the help of her associates the National Women's Suffrage Association and later the International Council of Women, with constituent chapters in numerous foreign

states, in the hopes of influencing governments to improve women's lots. Despite their achievements, the ICW and other similar associations were circumscribed in their efforts by available resources, the need for legitimacy, and competing priorities of governments. Not until the CSW initiated and the GA approved the call for International Women's Year and a world conference structure was a global intergovernmental and transnational process developed to define common issues and establish common strategies aimed at transforming the social order and the condition of women in national societies around the world. Intergovernmental institutions have been essential to this process as have transnational associations of women and the reciprocal relations between them. But the intergovernmental and transnational processes have enabled a critical mass of women to gain greater awareness and understanding of issues and strategies to mobilize energy and resources to influence social change whether in law, policy, custom, or culture to improve their situation.

Historic and contemporary transnational women's organizations have contributed to international pluralism. By forming new networks and associations, they have continued to contribute to pluralism and to aggregate interest within the international women's movement. No single transnational women's organization has become or sought to become an all-embracing, powerful, universal women's organization with the stature of an autonomous or quasi-autonomous actor in world politics. The Women's International Democratic Federation may have approximated this stature within the pre-1991 U.S.S.R and Eastern Europe. However, its cohesiveness appears to have dissipated with the crumbling of the former Soviet Union and the growth of new women's organizations in the newly independent states.

Transnational women's associations and networks have helped to promote women's advancement within national societies. But apart from advancing women's status, the women's movement reflects diverse interests that spell fragmentation and multiplicity of goals rather than singleness of purpose. Nonetheless, women's organizations are likely to remain a force for governments and international institutions to reckon with for many years to come. The women's conferences have helped to legitimate existing associations and to develop new ones. Groups such as those

noted here that are sensitive to women's issues and understand local power structures are in a position to hold governments accountable to the principles, goals, and action recommendations they pledged to achieve when they endorsed these international public policies and reform documents at the conferences.

Significance of the Women's Conferences: Implementation

The major conference documents endorsed by the conference of governments are to be implemented. Each contains a set of goals, strategies, and action recommended to governments, international institutions, transnational organizations, and individuals. The UN Commission on the Status of Women has been an important focal point within the U.S. system for promoting international implementation and monitoring progress in advancing women's status. Transnational associations affiliated with CSW are also important to the process of implementing internationally agreed upon goals and recommendations. But national governments at home must act to implement recommendations agreed upon at the conferences, and national memberships of transnational associations can hold them accountable to implementing those recommendations.

The U.S. government provides a useful example. Within its federal government, the U.S. delegation to the Beijing conference made a series of commitments. Following the conference, the President's Interagency Council on Women publicized the Beijing Platform of Action along with the U.S. commitments. Among these, the U.S. delegation endorsed U.S. ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. On September 28, 1996, the Interagency Council sponsored a nationwide teleconference in which U.S. delegation members reported on progress made since Beijing and plans for future efforts. In May 1997, the Interagency Council prepared and published *America's Commitment*, a description of federal programs benefitting women and new initiatives intended to follow-up the UN Fourth World Conference on Women.¹⁴ The President's Inter-Agency Council continues to be the principal governmental council to promote national implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action. To further implement the Beijing Platform of Action within a bilateral context, the Department of State, in

cooperation with the U.S. Ambassador to Vienna, Austria, sponsored Vital Voices: Women in Democracy in July 1997. One hundred and fifty women from the newly independent states of Eastern and Central Europe, along with 150 from Western democracies, assembled to discuss common concerns in politics, business, and law and the role women can play in helping to promote democracy.¹⁵

In terms of NGOs, the National Women's Conference Committee convened a twentieth-anniversary commemoration of the 1977 Houston Conference in Washington, D.C., in November 1997. Representatives of national societies of major transnational associations attended to discuss progress achieved since 1977 and action still to be taken.¹⁶

At the state government levels, implementation is not well publicized, although almost forty of the fifty states have commissions on women. In the state government of Pennsylvania, a Commission on the Status of Women initially established in the early 1970s has most recently been inactive. Governor Ridge signed an executive order reestablishing the Commission in June 1997. A reestablished Commission could help implement relevant recommendations from the Beijing Platform of Action along with the U.S. commitments relevant to the state. A progress report on Pennsylvania's activities in the area of women's advancement would be a useful step forward.

Within western Pennsylvania, the executive committee of the Pittsburgh/Beijing '95 and Beyond project prepared and circulated to interested persons a follow-up statement of activities organized within the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform. The project leaders and members participated in the nationally televised teleconference on September 28, 1996, sponsored by the U.S. Delegation and Inter-Agency Committee. The more than forty women from the Pittsburgh area who attended the international conference of governments and the NGO Forum have gained increased consciousness about the issues and the goals, strategies and recommended action needed to advance women's status in the region. Ideally, they will be in a position to monitor whether and to what extent law, policies, and customs need to be altered to promote equality, development, and peace within the region.

The governmental and unofficial, transnational associations of

women that have been so tremendously significant to the advancement of women internationally are also important at national, state, and local levels. Energized with new awareness of internationally agreed upon goals, strategies, and recommended actions from Beijing, the Pittsburgh/Beijing '95 and Beyond project can itself contribute to implementing international action plans at home.

Notes

1. *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women*, Blue Book Series (New York: United Nations, 1995); Anne Winslow, ed., *Women, Politics and the United Nations* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1995); Hilka Pietilla and Jean Vickers, *Making Women Matter*, rev. ed. (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Zed Books, Ltd., 1994).

2. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., eds., *Transnational Relations and World Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), ix–xi; xvii.

3. Margaret E. Galey, "Forerunners in Women's Quest for Partnership," in *Women, Politics and the United Nations*, 1–10.

4. UN, ECOSOC, Res. 48(4), March 29, 1947.

5. *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women*, 8–26; 37–64.

6. *The World Plan of Action*, approved by the UN World Conference on IWY in Mexico City, appears in *Report of the World Conference on International Women's Year* (New York: United Nations, 1975). *The World Program of Action*, approved by the UN World Conference of the UN Decade for Women held in Copenhagen, appears in *Report of the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women* (New York: United Nations, 1980). *Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000*, approved by the World Conference to Review and Appraise the UN Decade for Women held in Nairobi, Kenya, appears in the *Report of the World Conference* (New York: United Nations, 1985). *The Platform of Action*, approved by the Fourth World Women's Conference, held in Beijing, China, appears in *Report of the World Conference* (New York: United Nations, 1995).

7. *The World's Women 1995: Trends and Statistics* (New York: United Nations, 1995). *The World Survey of the Role of Women in Development* (New York: United Nations, 1994). See also *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women*, 26–37, and *Women in Politics and Decision-making in the Late Twentieth Century: A United Nations Study* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1992).

8. UNGA Res. 48/104 of 20 December 1993. See Document 107 in *Advancement of Women*, 459–62. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women was established following the entry into force of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women by Articles 17 through 22 of the Convention. The committee consists of expert members who review the reports of states parties to the convention and make recommendations to improve domestic law and practice concerning the status of women. The text of the convention is found in Document 69 in *Advancement of Women*, 234–40.

9. M. Galey, "Women Find A Place," in Winslow, *Women, Politics and the UN*, 19.

10. Marty Chen, "Engendering World Conferences: The International Women's

Movement and the UN," in *NGOs, the UN and Global Governance*, ed. Thomas G. Weiss and Leon Gordenker (Boulder, Colo.: Lynn Reinner, 1996), 139–55.

11. Margaret Schuler, *Empowerment and the Law* (Washington, D.C.: OEF International, 1986), 29.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (London: Penguin, 1988).

14. *America's Commitment: Federal Programs Benefitting Women and New Initiatives as Follow-up to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women* (Washington, D.C.: President's Interagency Council on Women, 1997).

15. Swanee Hunt, "Women's Vital Voices," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 1997): 2–7.

16. *Building on Beijing: United States NGOs Shape Women's National Action Agenda* (Muscatine, Iowa: Stanley Foundation, 1977).