



Women, Development, and the UN

From a contemporary vantage point, it seems extraordinary that there were just four women among the 160 signatories to the UN Charter at San Francisco in 1945. Two other women were present at the world body's founding conference but were not signatories. However, this handful of women established a sound foundation for the UN by making sure that women's issues were included. As Devaki Jain explains in her UNIHP volume, *Women, Development, and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice*, "the simple act of inserting the word 'women' in the text made sure that the principle of equality between the sexes was part of the founding ideas of the organization" (2005, 12).

Subsequently, the UN's ideas, language, and activities have fundamentally altered the situation of women in country after country, especially through its promotion of human rights and the mobilizing influence of the four global women's conferences held in Mexico, Copenhagen, Nairobi, and Beijing between 1975 and 1995. These raised awareness, spread ideas, built confidence, and created alliances that changed gender politics and policy worldwide. In turn, the conferences—and the women participating in them—also changed the structure and attitudes of the UN, providing the mandates for CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women), UNIFEM (the UN Development Fund for Women), and INSTRAW (the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women). Equally significant, concerns for women's issues raised awareness of broader human concerns in the whole process of development.

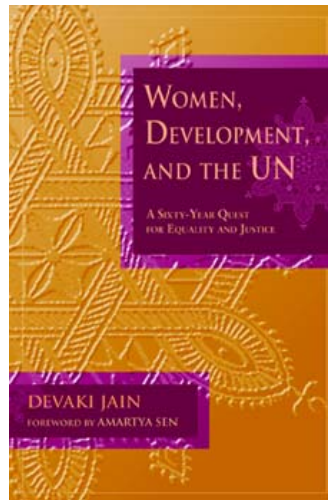
Many of these advances for women built both on new thinking and on new initiatives for action, in a process that was dynamic and interactive rather than simply linear. As Jain put it, "Women brought into the development discourse the questioning mode: their quest for dignity and equal citizenship led almost to definition by negation" (12). Each advance, each achievement uncovered further goals and aspirations, just as climbing a mountain reveals a new peak on the horizon just as the first one is reached. Thus, the early goal of better welfare for women gave way to broader goals for women in development (WID), then to women and development, then to gender

and development (GAD), then to mainstreaming and to the current realization that a combination of all of these is needed.

Early Landmarks

In the early years of the UN, women struggled to get a commission of their own. They succeeded in 1946 with the creation of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). But as Jain poses the underlying issue, "one must ask whether women would have wanted their own space within the UN if they had been comfortable in the mainstream. These issues of whether to remain separate or integrate with the mainstream—'the common life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals,' as Virginia Woolf put it in *A Room of One's Own*—continue to haunt efforts to land UN values on the ground" (17).

In spite of initial difficulties, the CSW was effective and influential, especially over its first three decades. While it was still a subcommission, it took the daring step of advocating that women be given full political suffrage worldwide—at a



time when only thirty of the original fifty-one UN member states allowed women to vote. The very idea of men and women having equal rights was itself quite new on the world stage. Yet for the first time in an international treaty or instrument, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 introduced this principle in unambiguous terms. And in 1952, responding to a call from the Sub-Commission on the Status of Women, the General Assembly

adopted the Convention on Political Rights of Women "to implement the principle of equality of rights for men and women contained in the Charter of the United Nations."

Even so, it was not until 1963 that the General Assembly asked the CSW and ECOSOC to prepare a comprehensive draft Declaration on the



Elimination of Discrimination against Women—DEDAW. It was the first time the UN had accepted the need to address discrimination from the perspective of women and to draft principles on which it would deal with the problem. As Jain explains, “DEDAW moved the idea of women’s equality beyond the confines of a rigid legal construct by pointing out those extralegal barriers that were socially constructed and more resistant to change” (47).

Ester Boserup, a Danish economist who worked both for her government and for the UN, changed knowledge and perceptions about women’s work and roles in developing countries with her path-breaking 1970 book *Women’s Role in Economic Development*. As Jain explains, “Her pioneering contribution was her finding that with changes in technology associated with modernization and patterns of land use, the status of women was actually being reduced on account of their marginalization in agricultural activities.” The main reason for this paradoxical conclusion was that development funding for agriculture usually ignored the subsistence farming that women typically engaged in. Her contribution was “extremely influential both on the design of development cooperation and in promoting further research to reveal the vital role women played in the economies of the South.” In light of these findings, donors began funding research on women as workers, which led to a “new” development definition called women in development (52-53).

Global Conferences

As mentioned earlier, the four global conferences on women and gender between 1975 and 1995 were pivotal and mobilizing events. They enormously advanced the case of equality and justice and changed gender policy and politics in practically all countries. While many criticize such gatherings as “talk shops,” Mexican anthropologist Lourdes Arizpe provided a different view in her UNIHP interview:

Even though [the UN] brings out resolution after resolution, so that you can paper the whole building with them, as I’ve heard it said, these resolutions place a mirror in front of governments and people....I’ve seen it in many meetings, where the powerless Indian groups or women’s groups have actually taken documents from...the United Nations, and

presented these to the officials from their governments, and have forced their governments to be more accountable because there exists this document which has been signed and ratified by a majority of countries in the world, showing that this is the way that governments should behave, or corporations should behave, or men should behave.

In a similar vein, Noeleen Heyzer, UNIFEM’s third director and now executive secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, commented on the movement of ideas from the international to the national level. “The UN became the place where women could bring issues ignored at the national level into the international spotlight to be addressed by national governments.” And she pointed out why that mattered in her UNIHP interview:

When the ideas took a powerful form, they got recognized and accepted, because it spoke about women’s lives....With these international norms, women pressured for the revisions of national norms and policies based on international standards. We worked so hard to ensure that decision making in the courts and in the criminal justice system also changed because of new legal standards and norms. So ideas became action which changed people’s lives.

However, in the 1980s, structural adjustment programs increased inequality around the globe and revealed the fragility of gains made in human rights and development. Women and girls were often the hardest hit by structural adjustment cutbacks in health and education. While the UN’s responses to the adverse effects of the Washington consensus—such as its advocacy of microcredit for poor women entrepreneurs and later the Millennium Development Goals—were important, they often failed to tackle the root causes of poverty.

Gender and Human Development

The *Human Development Report 1995*, subtitled *Gender and Human Development*, was brought out by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) as a contribution to the 1995 women’s conference held in Beijing. It was bold and innovative, quantifying the value of the non-monetized production by women (and men) in economic and household activities. Albeit a rough and



approximate calculation, the report estimated that the unpaid and therefore uncounted contributions of men and women worldwide amounted to an addition to world production of about 70 percent of measured gross domestic product, of which women provided more than half. The larger share of women's production in the total was hardly surprising, given that women work longer hours than men in nearly every country of the world. But it was the first time such an estimate was quantified on a global basis.

The report also introduced two special indices for measuring gendered inequality, the GDI (Gender Development Index) and the GEM (Gender Empowerment Measure). Both are composite indicators—the former measuring the average achievement of women compared to men in terms of the three basic dimensions of human development: in living a long and healthy life, in possessing useful knowledge, and in having a decent standard of living. The GEM measures gender inequality in three measures of empowerment: in decision making and participation, economically and politically, and in power over economic resources. As Jain describes, the *Human Development Report 1995* “noted the ‘fierce questioning’ of the dominant development paradigm and stated that ‘the goal of development must be justice, not charity’” (112). It also asserted that no attempt should be made to offer a universal model of gender equality. Each society should debate the issues and tailor action in relation to the situation and the opportunities that are open for further advance.

The 1995 World Conference on Women—the fourth in twenty years—was, as Jain termed it, “the culmination of a journey begun in 1975.” It was “also was the end of a process. It had developed an agenda that could stay with the nations and the movements for some time because it was so comprehensive” (145).

Four years later, the 1999 UN *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development* endorsed the findings of feminist economists worldwide that macroeconomics is not gender neutral. It recommended the protection and enhancement of the value of women's labor through the coordination of global economic demand.

Since 1945, women have been a consistent and persistent voice in calling for peace and disarmament. Two of the early groups—the

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the Inter-American Commission on Women, the former created during World War I and the latter in the decade that followed—were active in the peace movement. Two senior members of the Swedish government who had responsibilities for disarmament played leading roles in the UN's work on disarmament—Alva Myrdal and Inga Thorsson. In 1961, Women Strike for Peace protested the political and health effects of atmospheric nuclear testing, prompted by the discovery of strontium 90 in breast milk, a protest that contributed to the conclusion of the Partial Test Ban Treaty. Many other examples could be cited.

By the 1990s, it became clear that women suffered most in conflict zones, where rape is often used as a weapon of war, and that they were the most affected by landmines. The mobilization of action to deal these and other dimensions related to war culminated in the now famous Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security. This landmark achievement legally requires member states to increase participation of women at all levels and stages of the peacemaking process. Unanimously passed by the Security Council in October 2000, the resolution came about largely through the efforts of UNIFEM and its director, Noeleen Heyzer. In her UNIHP interview, she used this resolution to illustrate the impact of ideas on government policy and pointed to women and the mechanisms to involve NGOs in helping brief the Security Council:

We worked extremely hard to put the whole issue of women, peace, and security onto the Security Council agenda. The Security Council is an extreme case of a highly controlled arena and it is very difficult to put various issues on their agenda. To change the dialogue and to put in new issues that changes people's thinking is not easy.... We brought women—the nongovernmental groups, and women themselves who were affected by conflict, to talk to the members of the Security Council to prepare for the Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. UNIFEM's role was to get the space and to help women clarify their messages. We became the mediator of different worlds. It is not easy for different worlds to understand one another, I've learned. Therefore, we try to prepare the ground, help the women to



crystallize their voice, make sure that their message is heard by members of the Security Council, and determine what the Security Council needs to hear before they can make certain kinds of decisions....When that happened, a synergy took place....Members of the Security Council after that said, "We will change our statement." Up to that time, they were not even willing to come up with a short resolution.

Essentially, resolution 1325 marked the first time that gender was part of Security Council deliberations. It thus transformed the council from "being a gender-neutral body to one that is committed to work for women's involvement at all levels of conflict prevention and peacekeeping" (154-55). This was a first for women.

Conclusion

As Jain concludes, "despite great leaps forward in theorizing about development that moved women from the periphery to the center and began to see them as the holders of solutions to global problems, the poverty of the world's women has increased and intensified in most countries. It seems time to take a step back and ask some larger questions about why this is so" (158-9).

A major fault line running through narrations of history "is the failure to note, understand, and respect women's ideas and intellectual skills and outputs in the area of theoretical and analytical knowledge." While some of the values emerging from the understanding of poverty, inequality, discrimination, conflict resolution, deepening participation, and politics have been applied, recognition of women's intellectual and leadership powers has remained marginal, mainly confined to women's and gender perspectives rather than being applied far more widely.

The next generation of feminists will find a new path to equality, by covering the entire global governance landscape—more emphasis on peace and security, on economic and social development, on culture. In her UNIHP interview, Lourdes Arizpe has underlined the fact that people are no longer finding new meaning in development or in their lives "because the constitutive aspects of culture have been completely left out of development models and out of contemporary politics."

As Jain asserts, "There is an idea that culture can revitalize a dominated, fragmented, poverty- and conflict-ridden South. However, many cultural traditions have embargoes on many dimensions of women's concerns and freedom. It is here that culture clashes with women's access to the universality of human rights; often traditions and religious practices hurt and discriminate" (168).

The future shape of the women's movement with and within the UN is unclear. The world body has much to do before women assume their proper place there. "True reform will not happen until the *political will* is created and activated to bring women fully into the mainstream with equality in privileges, access to resources, and decision-making roles....Experience over the last six and a half decades has shown that much can be accomplished when the synergy flows back and forth between the UN and the women's movement" (168), challenging ideas and gaining momentum from all sides. The balance between words and action is still uneven.

Progress has been made and more and more women have broken through glass ceilings. But that progress has been uneven and in some countries more slowly than most women and many men would have liked. Only a convincing change in national political will can accelerate the pace.

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