

Engendering world conferences: the international women's movement and the United Nations

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The Fourth World Conference on Women will have been held in Beijing in September 1995. Twenty years earlier, the First World Conference on Women, which launched the UN Decade for Women, was held in Mexico City. Two other world conferences for women marked the midpoint and end of the decade: Copenhagen in 1980 and Nairobi in 1985.¹ These UN world conferences for women have served to galvanise the international women's movement,² to increase the visibility of women and to show that women matter to world development.³

As the international women's movement has grown and matured, other world conferences have attracted its attention and energy. This is so because women recognise the importance of voicing women's perspectives, not only in special conferences for women but also at all conferences, and because these conferences deal with issues that are of interest and concern to women. The ability of the movement to influence these world conferences has increased steadily over time.

UN world conferences also have attracted the attention of such other NGO-led movements as the human rights and environmental groups. When people now speak about a world conference, they usually mean two separate but related conferences—the official UN conference and the NGO forum—held simultaneously or sequentially in the same city. The official conference is the place where government delegations meet to negotiate official policies and documents. The NGO forum is the place where NGOs meet, exchange experiences and develop new strategies.⁴

This essay presents a brief history of how the NGO-led international women's movement has shaped the UN Decade for Women, the World Conferences for Women, and other UN conferences. In so doing, it examines how the types of NGOs interact with the UN, how the relationships between the UN and NGOs have changed over time, and what strategies have proved effective in putting women's concerns on a variety of international agendas.

This is partly the story of women's efforts to influence world conferences and partly an analysis of the methods and strategies women developed in the process. The essay starts with a brief background and history of the UN Decade for Women. It then describes how women were able to shape the policy debates at three recent UN conferences—the Rio conference on environment, the Vienna conference on human rights and the Cairo conference on population. It ends on an uncertain note since many of the gains made by the movement in Rio, Vienna

and Cairo have been challenged during the preparatory process leading towards the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing.⁵

Making women visible: the UN decade for women

Over the first 30 years of its existence,⁶ the United Nations made steady progress on women's rights within a framework laid out in its Charter of equality between men and women and nondiscrimination on the basis of gender.⁷ In those early years, according to the UN accreditation rules at that time, the only women's NGOs that had consultative status with the UN were those that were both international and representative: for example, the Associated Country Women of the World, the International Alliance of Women, World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, World Young Women's Christian Association and Zonta International. Only a few were headquartered outside Europe or North America.⁸

Since 1975 the UN perspective on women has changed dramatically. The movement itself has also changed dramatically over the past 20 years. The number and variety of NGOs and NGO networks have increased exponentially, and the leadership of the movement has shifted perceptibly from women in the North to women in the South. Moreover, the women's movement has accumulated significant experience and expertise and coalesced in a remarkable way to influence the global policy agenda.

According to the oral history of the UN family, the idea of and initial demand for an International Women's Year came from an international women's organisation in consultative status with the UN: in the Women's International Democratic Federation. The idea was taken up by two official women representatives to the UN Commission on the Status of Women.⁹ In 1972 the commission recommended to the General Assembly that 1975 be declared International Women's Year; it became the first of the UN theme years for which extensive preparations were undertaken at all levels.

Thus the International Women's Year is a prime example of an NGO initiative taken up by the UN system, one that exceeded all expectations. It developed into a UN Decade for Women which, in turn, generated 'a process with dimensions and repercussions such as the initiators had hardly dared to dream of'.¹⁰ The International Women's Year also marked the beginning of a new 'women's era' in the UN and the emergence of a global women's movement.

The major event of the year was the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City. Over 6000 women participated in the NGO forum in Mexico City, more nonofficial participants than at any previous UN world conference. Delegations from 133 member states took part in the official conference. They adopted a World Plan of Action, which 'was the first such document the world had seen to concentrate specifically on problems and concerns of women, covering all possible aspects of their lives from food, health and education to family planning and political participation'.¹¹ However, its comprehensiveness and its lack of an underlying causal explanation of women's status led some feminist critics to refer to the plan as a 'shopping list' of issues relating to women.¹² In December

that year, the General Assembly approved the recommendations of the Mexico City conference and declared 1976–1985 to be the UN Decade for Women.

In 1980 a second World Conference on Women was organised in Copenhagen to mark the midpoint of the decade and to assess how much the targets set in the World Plan of Action had been attained. At the official conference in Copenhagen, more so than at Mexico City, many wider political issues such as Zionism, apartheid and the new economic order were used to deflect attention from the World Plan of Action and the whole issue of women's equality. However, the official conference adopted a platform of action for the second half of the decade that emphasised employment, health, and education for women. Meanwhile, the 7000 people, mainly women, who had gathered at the NGO forum were able to communicate and find common ground, despite differences in political, ideological and cultural backgrounds. In the end, the Copenhagen conference covered a wider range of development issues and perspectives than were covered in Mexico City, including critiques of past approaches to women in development and of the new economic order's impact on women.

The Third World Conference on Women was held in Nairobi in 1985 to mark the end of the decade. The numbers for both the official conference and the NGO forum reached a record high. The number of delegates to the official conference was about one-third more than in Mexico City and Copenhagen—over 2000 delegates from 157 countries, and several hundred representatives of NGOs in consultative status to the United Nations.¹³ More significant still, over 14 000 women from some 150 countries attended the NGO forum. The final document of the Nairobi Conference, called 'Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women', provided an analytical framework as well as prescriptive measures to address the obstacles to the advancement of women. After long and strenuous negotiations during the conference, the 'Forward Looking Strategies' were adopted unanimously.¹⁴

By far the most conspicuous change over the decade was the exponential increase in the number and types of women's NGOs in every country of the world, and the complex of alliances, networks and coalitions set up to unite them. While thousands of women had participated in the three conferences, 'tens of thousands were mobilised by the process in countries around the world'.¹⁵ These new groups represented every hue in the ideological rainbow: secular, religious, radical, conservative, grassroots and elite. They were engaged in delivering welfare or development services to women, organising women for change, researching women's lives and work, advocating change for women and more.¹⁶ They were local, national, regional and international.

These groups represent a new breed of NGOs quite distinct from the established international women's NGOs that have long had consultative status with the UN. This new breed brought energy, vitality and creativity to the international women's movement as well as important links with local organisations and networks. Their goals were to bring women together to share information, resources and strategies, and to create alternative spaces for them at the local, national and global levels.¹⁷ By opting to remain within the framework of the UN, the older established women's organisations were soon outnumbered and overwhelmed by this new breed. However, the older established organisations

not only spearheaded the campaigns for the International Women's Year but also coordinated the organisation of the NGO forum at the three women's conferences during the decade.

At the international level, the new breed of NGOs manifested itself primarily as networks. A notable example is Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN): a network of scholars and activists in the South, which was established shortly before the Nairobi conference and has consistently articulated alternative development strategies. With the emergence of DAWN and other significant networks of women from the South, the leadership of the international women's movement shifted perceptibly—although not entirely—from North to South.

To maintain the emerging international networks of newer NGOs, a few more formal organisations have been formed. One of the first was the International Women's Tribune Center, which grew out of the NGO forum in Mexico City. Its location next to UN headquarters facilitates networking among grassroots women's organisations and between these organisations and the United Nations. The visions and aims of DAWN and other Third World NGOs have given impetus to the women's movement to set its own goals and aspirations.¹⁸ The skills and contacts of the International Women's Tribune Center (and other networking NGOs) also have given practical skills and knowledge to the women's movement.

Another result of the decade's national and international meetings—and of the thousands of smaller local meetings, seminars, studies and projects that sprang up around the world—was that women around the world not only knew each other better but were also better understood and more widely listened to.¹⁹ Women and development issues could no longer be overlooked by the United Nations or its member nations.

However, much of the Decade for Women was spent in addressing differences in approaches to feminism at the theoretical or ideological levels and differences between women from different social, cultural, historical and geographic locations at the practical level. By the end of the decade, the international women's movement had only begun to address these differences; the hierarchies of class, race and dependency that condition women's lives continued to divide them. Over the past decade, in contrast, the international women's movement has been able to forge remarkable consensus and coalitions around specific issues that affect women, namely environment, human rights and population.

Putting women on the agenda in Rio, Vienna and Cairo

The issues of concern to women, as well as their contributions and problems, came to the forefront in several conferences other than those specifically for women.²⁰ However, several other world conferences in the late 1970s 'failed totally to realize that there might be an important women's dimension to these topics, and that its recognition might enhance possibilities of solving some of the problems'.²¹

From their experience at these various world conferences, the international women's movement had learned several important lessons. The first was that women's voices have little chance of being heard at UN world conferences

without deliberate and concerted efforts. When there have been a few active women on the delegations, in the UN secretariat responsible for the conference, or in NGOs concerned with the substantive issue, they have generally taken the initiative. When sufficiently well-versed in UN procedures, the women have been able to get draft resolutions and text in support of women through all the preparatory stages and the conferences themselves.²²

The second lesson was that the best time to influence a world conference is during the preparatory process. Many groups and individuals went to the parallel NGO forum at the various women's conferences with the hope of being able to influence the resolutions of the intergovernmental conference. On the spot, however, this was very difficult. NGOs have to master lobbying techniques, understand UN conference procedures clearly and lobby effectively during the preparatory process to make an impact on the official debates. This was a bitter lesson.

The third lesson was that the international women's movement needed to build consensus and coalitions to bridge the ideological and material differences between women. To do so internationally, they first had to do so at the local, national and regional levels.

Coming out of the decade, the international women's movement was determined to build on these lessons and to put women on the agenda of all world conferences, not just of special conferences for women. The experiences shared, the networks and coalitions strengthened and the lessons learned during the 1970s and 1980s all had important consequences for the decade that followed. The international women's movement entered the 1990s with more political vision, know-how and strategies and with a wider political base than ever before.

Rio: women, environment and sustainable development

The UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio in 1992 is seen as a turning point for NGOs and as an example of strengthening partnerships between governments, the United Nations and NGOs. The number of NGO representatives who attended the official conference as well as the number of people who attended the NGO forum were the largest ever.²³ Because the UNCED planners adopted an inclusive accreditation process, over 1400 NGOs attended the official conference.²⁴ Thousands more were informally linked to the UNCED process through the preparatory meetings and the many regional meetings leading up to Rio: a record 30 000 people from 171 countries attended the Global Forum.²⁵ Increased access to NGOs proved to be a two-way street, giving NGOs information and access to policy-makers, and giving policy-makers expert advice from the diverse NGO community.²⁶

For the international women's movement whose member NGOs had already turned out in record numbers in Nairobi, Rio marked a different type of turning point. They effectively put women's issues and concerns on the official global agenda; they established 'that women's issues are part of global agendas and must be incorporated there, rather than addressed separately',²⁷ and they first worked closely with another social movement, in this case, the environmental movement.²⁸

Women's Congress. To build a consensus of women's perspectives and to prepare women to participate equally at Rio, the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), a US-based group guided by an International Policy Action Committee, organised a World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet in late 1991. The congress was attended by 1500 women from 83 countries, and included women from UN agencies, governments, and organisations concerned with environment and development, religious organisations, grassroots groups, universities, foundations and the news media. It was the largest ever unofficial conference convened to prepare for and influence a UN world conference.²⁹

Former US Congresswoman Bella Abzug and other WEDO members had attended the Mexico, Copenhagen and Nairobi conferences and the PrepComs leading up to Rio. They had learned what it would take 'to bring women's perspectives into the proceedings and to claim equal representation of women in the whole UNCED process, as well as in national delegations attending the Rio Conference'.³⁰ And they were determined to make both happen.

To organise the Women's World Congress on a Healthy Planet, WEDO formed a steering committee of 10 women representing the various regions of the world. Members of the steering committee agreed to organise campaigns in their own regions not only for the inclusion of equal numbers of women as men in the official delegations to Rio but also to make women's concerns an integral part of Agenda 21, the official document for Rio.

A notable feature of the Congress was a tribunal during which five judges heard 15 women from different countries testify on women's perspectives on various issues relating to the environment, including an environmental code of ethics; environment and development; and science, technology and population. The most notable outcome of the congress was a document reflecting the essence of the discussions at the congress, the Women's Action Agenda 21.³¹

During the months between the Congress in November 1991 and the official UNCED Conference in Rio in June 1992, WEDO set up task forces to analyse the draft of the official Agenda 21, to compare it with Women's Agenda 21, and to prepare amendments to strengthen the recommendations and make them reflect women's views. At the beginning of this process in the preliminary draft of Agenda 21, women's issues and concerns were mentioned only in the 'poverty' section or in the context of 'vulnerable groups'. By the end of this process, in the final draft of the official Agenda 21, women's issues and concerns were mentioned in hundreds of places, most notably in paragraphs that recognised women as actors and participants in the move towards more sustainable development.³²

Women's Caucus. Much of this success was the result of concerted efforts by alliances of NGOs during the preparatory phase leading up to the conference. This concerted effort was facilitated by an innovative mechanism introduced by WEDO, a public forum called the 'Women's Caucus'. It provided a bridge between the official deliberations and the parallel NGO deliberations. Govern-

mental delegates are invited to join NGO participants in a daily dialogue on key issues being addressed each day at the official deliberations.

The Women's Caucus was held each morning in the NGO forum to review the results of the previous day's official meetings, to share information and to plan daily strategies. Representatives of women's groups then used the daily statements to lobby their respective government delegations. By combining efforts and skills in caucus sessions, NGOs talked with delegates knowledgeably, gave helpful suggestions on possible changes and adaptations, and added specific issues and concerns where they had been left out.³³

First organised during the UNCED preparatory process, the Women's Caucus has been organised at every preparatory meeting and conference since. In addition to providing a forum for all women to air their views, issues and concerns, a major function of the Women's Caucus is to monitor all amendments and rewrites of draft documents. To focus on specific subjects within drafts, the caucus breaks into task forces. Each task force organises around one or more priority areas within the draft documents. They study drafts within the context of their particular subject areas and make revisions or suggest changes. The task forces report back to the caucus daily. From their reports, statements are produced that relate to the part of the draft UN document being discussed by delegates that day.

The Women's Caucus is credited with contributing to a landmark decision that 'key elements relating to women's critical economic, social and environmental contributions to sustainable development be addressed ... in all the substantive documentation, particularly Agenda 21, the Earth Charter and the Convention'. It further requested that recommendations from relevant meetings held by governments, intergovernmental and nongovernmental organisations be made available to the Preparatory Committee. This enabled the recommendations from key NGO initiatives to be integrated into the UNCED documents.

Vienna: women's rights are human rights

By the late 1980s, various international, regional and local women's groups had begun meeting to strategise on how to make women's human rights perspectives more visible. Galvanised by the successes and lessons from the Rio process, the international women's movement reached the Vienna conference better prepared than ever before.

Global campaign. In 1991 the Center for Women's Global Leadership (Global Center) organised a strategic planning meeting of grassroots activists from 20 countries. At this meeting, the participants decided to target their activities on preparing for the upcoming UN World Conference on Human Rights and to focus on 'gender-based violence against women as the issue which demonstrates most clearly and urgently what it means to expand human rights to incorporate women'.³⁴ They called for a global campaign that would take up various strategies for linking women's rights to human rights, including an annual period of global action; an international consensus-building effort; a petition drive; local

action by women's groups; documentation of violence against women; and drafting a consensus document on integrating women's rights into human rights.³⁵

As part of the global campaign, local women's groups attended national preparatory meetings, and regional networks of women's groups attended the regional preparatory meetings. All worked to transform the limited interpretations of human rights.³⁶ National, regional and global documents were written, exchanged and revised by women in this process, and several international gatherings were held to develop some common points of emphasis to present in Vienna.

In 1993 the Global Center organised a second strategic planning meeting to focus on how women could most effectively influence events at the Vienna Conference. The meeting brought together a small group of women from around the world who had been effective at the national and regional meetings. The specific tasks of the meeting were to work on lobbying strategies; to develop a set of recommendations on women's human rights; and, in particular, to plan a global tribunal on women's human rights.

Women's caucuses. The Global Campaign proved highly successful. In the final PrepCom before Vienna, the Women's Caucus—including women from both the North and South who worked in government, NGOs and in UN agencies—succeeded in exerting pressure to add text on women to the draft document and in forming the basis for many women to continue working together in Vienna.

Throughout the Vienna Conference, the NGO Women's Caucus met daily to assess the conference proceedings and their implications for women. A lobbying group from the caucus kept track of the drafting process in the official conference to ensure that the gains made in the preparatory process were not lost. In response to threats of new clauses inimical to women's human rights, they drafted new texts for delegates. The NGO Women's Caucus gained time slots for six short presentations from its members at the official conference.

Also, throughout the Vienna Conference, a daily Governmental Women's Caucus was organised by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). This caucus brought together women from governmental delegations or UN agencies with representatives from the NGO Women's Caucus to explore possible means of collaborating to advance women's human rights at the conference. Vienna was the first conference to have two parallel women's caucuses, which was necessary because most NGOs were denied access to the official conference.

Global tribunal. Undoubtedly, the most dramatic event in this process was the Global Tribunal on Violations of Women's Human Rights, organised by the Global Center together with the International Women's Tribune Center and others at the NGO forum. The tribunal featured women from 25 countries who had survived a vast range of human rights abuses—from domestic violence to political persecution to violations of economic rights. Their collective testimony

als provided graphic demonstration of how being female can be life threatening, subjecting some women to torture, terrorism and slavery every day.³⁷

The idea of convening a Global Tribunal on Violations of Women's Human Rights emerged from discussions over several months among those active in the Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights in different regions.³⁸ In response, the Global Center and the International Women's Tribune Center sent out a call for local grassroots hearings on violations of women's rights. During the last six months leading up to Vienna, women around the world held hearings to document individual complaints and group cases of violations of women's human rights. The resulting testimonials were recorded and the documentation sent to the UN Center for Human Rights.

The Global Tribunal was presided over by four international judges. The testimonies gave vivid expression to the life and death consequences of women's human rights violations.³⁹ The judges, working in consultation with an advisory committee of women lawyers from different regions, sought to assess accountability for the human rights abuses presented by those testifying at the tribunal, to delineate the human rights principles and agreements that had been violated, and to make concrete suggestions on how to redress violations. The judges and their advisors drafted a final collective statement that was delivered at the tribunal's closing session.⁴⁰

The organisers then secured time on the official agenda for a report on the tribunal and its recommendations. Presentations from the tribunal were followed by three speakers from the NGO Women's Caucus. One of the speakers called for a moment of silence and asked delegates to remember all the women around the world who had died or been badly injured by domestic violence during that minute. Leaders of the global campaign later reported, 'Women had arrived on the Conference agenda!!'⁴¹

Cairo: women's reproductive health and rights

In Cairo in September 1994, the United Nations hosted the Third World Conference on Population and Development. In many aspects, Cairo marked the culmination of a long struggle by the international women's movement to transform the public agenda. As one observer noted, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) represented 'a giant leap for womankind'.

Global campaign. Having listened to the polarised and heated debates on population issues at Rio, a group of women decided to initiate an international campaign to build a consistent framework on population issues among women's groups and to bring women's voices to the upcoming conference on population and development. They approached the International Women's Health Coalition, which had been working with women's health activists around the world since 1980, to convene an expert group.

In September 1992, women's health advocates from Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, the USA and Western Europe met to discuss how

women's voices might best be heard during preparations for Cairo and in the conference itself. The group suggested that a strong positive statement from women around the world would make a unique contribution to reshaping the population agenda to better ensure reproductive health and rights. The group, which called itself the 'Women's Voices '94 Alliance', drafted a 'Women's Declaration on Population Policies', which was reviewed, modified and finalised by over 100 women's organisations across the globe.

Between September 1992 and September 1994, when the Cairo conference was held, at least 15 national, regional and international women's meetings reviewed the declaration. And the original London group convened a major women's conference—what it called a 'feminist PrepCom'—in Rio de Janeiro in January 1994. One of the aims of the Rio conference was to 'search for and identify common ground and universalities in women's perspectives on reproductive health and justice'. In five short days, 215 women from 79 countries who gathered in Rio generated a collective statement as well as a series of strategies and activities to ensure that women's perspectives and experiences were considered and acted upon at the Cairo conference.⁴²

As a critical part of the follow-up strategy, the International Women's Health Coalition and a core group of colleagues worldwide focused their attention on the official draft document: entering what they refer to as the 'battle of the brackets'.⁴³ They decided that there were three ways to influence the official document—by influencing the composition of official delegations, by lobbying at all preparatory meetings and at the conference itself and by working with the media. Several of the Rio conference participants were appointed to their government delegations. Others mobilised a tightly planned strategy and process for the focused lobbying required in the final PrepCom and at the Cairo conference.

By the time they reached Cairo, the Women's Voices '94 Alliance and the Coalition were well prepared. They had reached remarkable consensus on key values (gender equality, reproductive rights and male responsibility) across the divides of ideology, culture and relative wealth and power.

Women's caucus. Throughout the two-year preparatory period, at all of the official and NGO meetings, WEDO facilitated a daily NGO Women's Caucus. Members negotiated with official delegations to ensure that the draft document incorporated women's concerns throughout and to secure inclusion of a chapter specifically on women.⁴⁴ These negotiations before and during the conference 'required delicate balancing of diverse values, stark political and economic power imbalances, and other significant social and cultural differences' among governments as well as women's groups.⁴⁵

At the NGO forum in Cairo, as in Rio and Vienna, every morning started with a meeting of the Women's Caucus to review negotiations. After the advocacy priorities for the day were discussed, the more than 1000 members of the caucus went into action. Every afternoon the Women's Caucus shifted venue to the official conference site to facilitate a coordinating meeting among NGO representatives in the official conference, representatives of the Women's Caucus and

members of the press. At the final caucus meeting, a 'post-Cairo Task Force' formed by the Women's Caucus presented its recommendations for an innovative new watchdog network called 'Women Watching ICPD'.

In addition, in Cairo as in Vienna, small groups of core lobbyists systematically intervened with government delegations on a timely basis not allowed by the large-group processes of the caucus. Although the negotiations bogged down over the 'brackets', in particular over one paragraph on abortion, the outcome was a clear victory for women's NGOs and for women. There is no doubt that the language used in the 'Programme of Action' document 'leads the way for new approaches to population and development, that places women's health, their empowerment, and rights at their center'.⁴⁶ By the end of the conference, governments had 'reached an unprecedented consensus' on the 20-year Programme of Action.⁴⁷

A noteworthy feature of the Cairo Conference that undoubtedly contributed to the unprecedented consensus was the number of NGO representatives on official delegations and the remarkable dialogue between NGOs and the official delegations. In particular, the US delegation made every attempt to understand the concerns of women from the developing world. Over half its delegates were from NGOs, including the vice-president of the International Women's Health Coalition and the US co-chair of WEDO. The US delegation was led by Undersecretary of State Tim Wirth, who held a daily press briefing at the NGO forum, not at the official conference hall, as an expression of his openness to NGO concerns.

Even the Secretary-General of the Conference and Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Dr Nafis Sadik, visited the Women's Caucus at one of its daily morning meetings in the NGO forum.⁴⁸ She acknowledged that the efforts of the members of the Women's Caucus—in drafting, educating participants and the public about the complexity of the issues and lobbying official delegates—had been critical to the success of the conference.

In their analysis of the remarkable consensus that was reached in Cairo, the International Women's Health Coalition writes:

The underlying basis for consensus was created by the constituency most concerned—women. For the first time, a wide range of representatives of women's organizations from every region of the world were central to the negotiation of an international population document. Working together with a common purpose, women engaged at every stage of conference preparations and at every level to gain access to negotiations. Gradually, through the conference preparations, governments and international agencies recognized women as legitimate players. Women served as members of many government delegations, and led NGO efforts to lobby governments both during preparatory sessions and at the conference in Cairo. This involvement, along with governments' consultation with women's groups in many countries and at the UN through the ICPD process, gives the Cairo Programme of Action a legitimacy and a political base of support that previous government policies and programs have never had.

At numerous points throughout the process of drafting and finalizing the document, when language accepted by the majority of governments and NGOs was threatened by a handful of delegations, women were the ones who mobilized to protect the

emerging consensus. Because women have been most affected by population policies and programs, they emerged as an unassailable moral force.⁴⁹

Shaping the policy agenda: critical changes and necessary strategies

Critical changes

The UN Decade for Women, and the decade that followed, radically reshaped the international women's movement and its relationship to the UN system and to the international community more broadly. There have been at least four dimensions: there are new players on the global stage; they have new skills and competencies; they have forged critical alliances and coalitions; and they have taken their place at the policy-making table.

New players. Within the international women's movement, as elsewhere, the older established NGOs have been supplemented by a new breed of NGOs. By far the most conspicuous change over the decade was the exponential increase in the number and types of women's groups and women's NGOs in every country of the world, and the complex of alliances, networks and coalitions set up to unite them. Most visibly, there has been a dramatic increase in women's groups and women's NGOs in developing countries.

New skills. The international women's movement has matured as well as grown and diversified. Women's NGOs have developed or strengthened their skills: substantive and technical; advocacy and political; research and policy analysis; and documentation and communication. They have learned how to operate on the global stage and how to make themselves seen and heard. Moreover, they have provided effective leadership to the development, environment, human rights and population fields.

New alliances. The number of NGO alliances, networks and coalitions have increased as well as the number of individual NGOs. Interestingly, many of these are alliances of international NGOs working with grassroots groups. Most critically, NGO networks and coalitions have been developed that cut across regional and North-South divides to build broad-based consensus on key issues.

New 'places'. Increasing numbers of women from NGOs have been offered or taken a place at policy-making tables, either national or international. They have demanded to be included, and they are increasingly recognised as important players with special competence on substantive issues.

Necessary strategies

The experience of the international women's movement offers important lessons about optimal strategies such as 'be prepared' and 'take part in the preparatory

process'. To participate effectively in policy deliberations at all levels, the women's movement did its homework and came prepared. Without collecting, knowing and analysing their facts and without building broad-based coalitions, it would have been difficult for women to influence the policy agenda. They also recognised the importance of getting involved in the preparatory process that precedes world conferences because most of the negotiating work is completed before the formal deliberations begin, with only a few key issues left unresolved.

To participate effectively in the preparatory process as well as the formal policy-making sessions, the women's movement developed several key strategies, including the following:

1. *Mounting global campaigns.* To mount pressure on official policymakers and to build coalitions and consensus, women's NGOs mounted global campaigns calling for dialogue and action at the local level; for lobbying at the national, regional and international levels; for petition drives; for gathering evidence on and documenting violations against women's rights; for attending all local, national, regional and international meetings; and more.
2. *Building coalitions and consensus.* To build coalitions and consensus, women's NGOs held multiple strategic planning meetings with a representative cross-section of women and women's NGOs from around the world: at the local, national, regional and international levels.
3. *Preparing policy documents.* To influence policy makers and official policy documents, women's NGOs drafted their own resolutions, treaties, protocols, conventions and platform documents.
4. *Influencing official delegations.* To influence the position of national governments and the composition of official delegations, women's NGOs published reports, held briefings, lobbied and nominated women and NGO representatives to be members of official delegations.
5. *Bridging NGO and official deliberations.* To bridge NGO and official deliberations at international meetings, women's NGOs developed a mechanism called the women's caucus: a daily time and space at all policy making meetings for NGOs to strategise and to hold dialogues with official delegates and policy makers.

In pursuing these strategies, the international women's movement learned to focus on key issues and on official documents, to work with all players and to become serious lobbyists. To provide coherence to their global campaigns, women's NGOs focused on one or two key issues—for example violence against women in the campaign leading up to Vienna, and women's reproductive health and rights for Cairo. To influence the outcomes of world conferences, women's NGOs focused on the official platform document for each conference. They drafted alternative or additional texts to reflect women's interests, concerns and perspectives. To influence the outcomes of world conferences, women's NGOs worked deliberately and strategically with government delegates, UN agencies, media, influential persons and other NGOs. Finally, to become serious lobbyists, women's NGOs found they needed to 'have passion, solidarity, discipline, stamina, and money'.⁵⁰

Beijing and beyond

Towards Beijing

The two decades from 1975 to 1995 have been the most dynamic in the history of the international women's movement, which was invigorated by Mexico City; grew and strengthened during the UN Decade for Women; and was empowered by the process leading up to and the victories gained in Rio, Vienna and Cairo. The international women's movement developed tremendous political and strategic skills in linking up to the UN system before and during the recent world conferences. Indeed, the movement helped change the way UN conferences are planned and conducted.

The immediate challenge before the international women's movement has been to maintain its momentum towards Beijing. To meet this challenge, it has had to keep the UN and national governments aware that the movement is watching to see how governments will deliver in Beijing on promises made in Rio, Vienna and Cairo.⁵¹

However, on the eve of the Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in September 1995, there were signs of a well-organised and well-financed backlash to these promises. The final Beijing PrepCom, held in New York in March 1995, was marred by restrictions on NGO access and accreditation as well as cumbersome, inefficient and divisive drafting processes. After four weeks of mostly closed-door negotiations, the Draft Platform of Action was still far from a consensus document. About 35% of the draft was still bracketed, which meant that one or more governments were unwilling to accept the text's content or wording; this bracketed text would be subject to further negotiations and additional amendments in the official conference in Beijing. Most critically, all statements reaffirming the principles set forth in Vienna and Cairo remained bracketed.⁵²

What accounts for the lack of consensus over the Draft Platform of Action? To begin with, the final draft of the document was introduced very late in the preparatory process, leaving little time for delegations to prepare positions. Second, the preparatory process itself is sufficiently participatory that minority voices can slow down, derail or obstruct the process. As noted above, even a single government can call for text that it is unwilling to accept to be bracketed. At the final Beijing PrepCom in March 1995, fewer than a dozen countries (out of 184) objected to most of the bracketed text coming out of the PrepCom. And there is evidence to suggest that most of these countries are members of a sophisticated, well-funded and well orchestrated backlash to the victories achieved in Vienna and Cairo.

Beyond Beijing

Whatever the outcome of the Beijing Conference, the next challenge for the international women's movement will be to implement the promises made to women in Rio, Vienna and Cairo. It must influence and monitor national policies and programmes to ensure that they reflect the goals and mandates from the recent world conferences; translate these goals and mandates into concrete

projects; forge working relationships with the specialised agencies of the UN; train more women on how to use existing treaties, conventions and laws;⁵³ encourage women to continue to pursue many of the strategies used in the global campaigns; nurture the international networks and alliances forged during the global campaigns; and maintain links with the wider development community.

The international women's movement is well positioned, as it enters the 21st century, to consolidate and build on previous gains. The competence, solidarity, maturity, discipline, strength and will of the movement should not be underestimated. While one part of the movement has secured strategic gains for women at the global policy level, another part pursued practical gains at the local level by implementing concrete programmes, working with the specialised agencies of the UN and organising the grass roots. However, in the current global climate of social conservatism and fiscal austerity, the international women's movement will need allies and resources both from within and outside the UN system.

Notes

¹ The names of the cities that host world conferences are commonly used as a 'nickname' for the conferences held there. However, Mexico City hosted both the First World Conference on Women in 1975 and the Second International Conference on Population and Development in 1984. In this paper, Mexico City is used to refer to the first conference.

² Whether to use the singular 'women's movement' or the plural 'women's movements' is a thorny question. 'To speak of a single women's movement may attribute too great a unity to what can be perceived only as a plurality of activities and approaches, diversified by class, culture, region and the like. Yet to speak of women's movements in the plural raises concerns about what, if any, commonality there is among these groups and whether it is possible to speak of them in a global context.' Deborah Stienstra, *Women's Movements and International Organizations*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1994, p 160. I use the singular women's movement since it reflects the common goals and concerns around which women have organised at the global level and the remarkable consensus women have built in preparation for recent global conferences.

³ The international women's movement is primarily composed of and led by nongovernmental organisations: local, national, regional and international. In addition to NGOs and individual women members, the international women's movement is composed of and has benefited from the leadership of a wide variety of institutions, including governmental agencies, donor agencies, academic groups, business groups, religious groups and more.

⁴ The term 'NGO forum' is used here as a common term for the parallel NGO conference held at world conferences. Some variation on that term has been used at most but not all world conferences. For instance, the following terms were used for the parallel NGO conferences at the world conferences for women: International Women's Year Tribune in Mexico City; the NGO Forum in Copenhagen; and Forum '85 in Nairobi. The first major UN event at which a parallel NGO forum was held was the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm.

⁵ This paper draws on several published sources which spell out in far greater detail the key players and the substantive gains. At this writing in mid-1995, parts of the story have yet to be told, at least in written form—particularly those relating to the Social Summit held in March 1995, where women's NGOs were key players and the Beijing Conference itself, to be held in September 1995. So the paper also draws on discussions with several of the key players: Peggy Antrobus of DAWN; Charlotte Bunch of the Center for Women's Global Leadership; Marilyn Carr of UNIFEM; Susan Davis of the Women's Environment and Development Organization; Joan Dunlop of the International Women's Health Coalition; Adrienne Germain of the International Women's Health Coalition; Noeleen Heyser of UNIFEM; Vicki Semmler of the International Women's Tribune Center; Peg Snyder (formerly) of UNIFEM; and Anne Walker from the International Women's Tribune Center.

⁶ It is important to note that the history of NGOs lobbying the international community on issues of concern to women predates the United Nations. Before World War II, for example, a number of nongovernmental organisations made a proposal to the League of Nations to prohibit sexual slavery, which was not adopted before the outbreak of the war. Soon after the formation of the United Nations in 1946, the issue resurfaced.

And by 1949, the Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others had been adopted.

- ⁷ Several landmark years for the advancement of women within the UN system include: 1946, when the Commission on the Status of Women and the Branch for the Advancement of Women (within the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs) were established; 1948, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted; and 1967, when the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was adopted. This declaration was the precursor to the Convention, which was adopted by the General Assembly in 1979 and ratified by the mandatory 20 countries in 1981.
- ⁸ A study of 47 international women's organisations at that time found that nine were religious in orientation, 10 were in the international relations arena, 18 were for professional and working women, seven were educational and cultural, and three were for sportswomen. Elise Boulding, *Women in the Twentieth Century World*, New York: Sage, 1977, p 187. Only five were headquartered outside Europe or North America. The first international women's organisations were established in 1880.
- ⁹ The two women representatives were the Romanian representative (Florica Andrei) and the Finnish representative (Helvi Sipila). Helvi Sipila was later to be appointed the first female Assistant Secretary-General.
- ¹⁰ Hilikka Pietila & Jeanne Vickers, *Making Women Matter: The Role of the United Nations* London: Zed Books, 1994, p 76.
- ¹¹ *Ibid* pp 78–79.
- ¹² Rounaq Jahan, 'The International Women's Year Conference and Tribune', *International Development Review*, 3, 1975, p 38.
- ¹³ Pietila & Vickers, *Making Women Matter*, p 7.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, p 48. The conferences in Mexico City and Copenhagen were not able to reach consensus in their deliberations to adopt the final documents unanimously.
- ¹⁵ Irene Tinker & Jane Jaquette, 'UN Decade for Women: its impact and legacy', *World Development*, 15 (3), 1987, p 419.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 426.
- ¹⁷ Stienstra, *Women's Movements*, p 91.
- ¹⁸ Pietila & Vickers, *Making Women Matter*, p 73.
- ¹⁹ Tinker & Jaquette, 'UN Decade', p 426.
- ²⁰ Most notably at the 1974 International Conference on Population and Development; the 1974 World Food Conference; the 1979 World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development Conference; and the 1979 UN Conference on Science and Technology for Development. NGOs together with women staff in the UN system brought women's contributions and problems to the attention of all these conferences. The first female Assistant Secretary-General, together with US NGOs, organised a lobbying conference on the role of women as part of the preparatory process for the Population Conference. Women staff in the nutrition section of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) lobbied for recognition of women's role in agriculture at the World Food Conference and an NGO group organised a parallel meeting which succeeded in influencing the conference. An NGO group distributed information to and carried out effective lobbying with delegates to the Agrarian Reform and Rural Development Conference (both before and during the conference). And a group of NGOs, together with female delegates to the Preparatory Committee meetings, lobbied to have women's perspective appropriately incorporated in the texts of the draft document during the preparatory process and, when the draft text met active opposition during the conference, regrouped to draft a resolution on women, science and technology, which was unanimously adopted.
- ²¹ Pietila & Vickers, *Making Women Matter*, p 87. These were the conferences on Economic Cooperation, Water, Desertification, Technical Cooperation and Primary Health Care.
- ²² *Ibid*, p 89.
- ²³ These 30 000 participants represented over 9000 organisations, groups and movements from 171 countries. *Ibid*, p 139.
- ²⁴ Only NGOs with consultative status at the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) are automatically accredited to attend UN world conferences and the preparatory committee meetings (commonly referred to as PrepComs). In order to become accredited to attend a world conference and its PrepComs, NGOs that are not in consultative states with ECOSOC must submit specific information about their organisation and its work. For Rio, UNCED adopted an inclusive accreditation process that allowed 1420 NGOs to attend the official conference.
- ²⁵ Yolanda N Kakabadse & Sarah Burns, *Movers and Shapers: NGOs in International Affairs*, Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 1994.
- ²⁶ Maurice Strong and the UNCED Secretariat can be credited with using an accreditation process that allowed 1420 NGOs to attend UNCED. When the Commission on Sustainable Development was formed to oversee implementation of the UNCED plan of action, they granted roster status to any NGO accredited at UNCED. This has opened the door for greater NGO access to the UN system.

- ²⁷ Charlotte Bunch, 'Organizing for women's human rights globally', in: Joanna Kerr (ed), *Ours By Right: Women's Rights as Human Rights*, London: Zed Books, 1993, p 148.
- ²⁸ Each of these brief descriptions focuses on a few key players, strategies and events. Admittedly, many other key players, strategies and events are not mentioned. For instance, in 1991 as part of the preparatory process for UNCED, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) held a meeting called Global Assembly-Partners in Life. At that meeting, 218 success stories of women's roles in environmental management were showcased. United Nations Development Fund for Women and United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service, *Putting Gender on the Agenda*, New York: UNIFEM and UN/NGLS, 1995, p 4.
- ²⁹ Pietila & Vickers, *Making Women Matter*, p 135.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, p 135.
- ³¹ The Women's Congress was not the only body preparing alternative documents for Rio. One month after the Women's Congress, several hundred NGOs attended a People's Summit in Paris. They decided to undertake an Alternative Treaty Process, preparing drafts for numerous treaties to be discussed and developed in Rio among the NGO representatives. Altogether they produced 46 alternative treaties on diverse subjects related to the environment and sustainable development. Of these 46, two focused exclusively or predominantly on women while many of them integrated women's concerns into other functional themes.
- ³² Pietila & Vickers, *Making Women Matter*, p 137.
- ³³ International Women's Tribune Center, 'Claiming our rights!', *The Tribune: A Woman and Development Quarterly*, Newsletter 51, New York: iwtc, March 1994.
- ³⁴ Bunch, 'Organizing for women's rights', p 146.
- ³⁵ The Global Campaign included the following: an annual period of global action called '16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence'—during the 16 days that link International Day Against Violence Against Women on November 25 and Human Rights Day on December 10; an international consensus-building effort to bring women's human rights on to the agenda of the Vienna conference; and a petition drive asking that the Vienna conference 'incorporate women into the agenda in two ways: in relation to all the other topics; and by specifically addressing the question of violence against women'. By the time of Vienna, over 1000 sponsoring groups had gathered almost half a million signatures from 124 countries. Local action by women's groups included: holding dialogues with local human rights groups on women's rights issues; developing their own agendas for the regional conferences that were part of the preparatory process; documenting violence against women by holding local and regional hearings on the violation of women's human rights; drafting resolutions based on this material; and preparing a consensus document on integrating women's rights into human rights for consideration at the conference.
- ³⁶ Charlotte Bunch & Niamh Reilly, *Demanding Accountability: The Global Campaign and Vienna Tribunal for Women's Human Rights*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Center for Women's Global Leadership and New York: UNIFEM, 1994, p 5.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*.
- ³⁸ Previous tribunals, such as the one at the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet in Miami in 1991 and the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in Brussels in 1976, were sources of inspiration.
- ³⁹ Bunch & Reilly, *Demanding Accountability*, p 8.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p 16.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, p 104.
- ⁴² Claudia Gracia-Moreno, 'Introduction', in: *Reproductive Health and Justice: International Women's Health Conference for Cairo '94*, New York: International Women's Health Coalition [IWHC] and Rio de Janeiro: Citizenship, Studies, Information, Action [CEPIA], 1990.
- ⁴³ The bracketed portions of a draft document contain text on which no consensus has been reached and over which there were often heated debates.
- ⁴⁴ UNIFEM and UN/NGLS 1995, p 28.
- ⁴⁵ Adrienne Germain & Rachel Kyte, *The Cairo Consensus: The Right Agenda for the Right Time*, New York: International Women's Health Coalition, 1995, p 4.
- ⁴⁶ Joan Dunlop, 'Preface' in *ibid*, p i.
- ⁴⁷ Germain & Kyte, *The Cairo Consensus*, p 1. Out of the 184 countries, 167 countries agreed to the Cairo Document in its entirety. 'In the end, only 17 nations expressed reservations, each reservation being on a specific chapter or paragraph of the Programme of Action. No country reserved on the entire document.' *Ibid*, p 3.
- ⁴⁸ Early in the preparatory process for Cairo, Dr Sadik had been extremely resistant to including NGOs in the conference process. However, under pressure from the donor and NGO community, she conceded. By the third PrepCom, Sadik was encouraging all countries to include NGOs in their delegations to Cairo. By then, NGOs had proved their worthiness in the regional preparatory meetings and the expert group meetings.
- ⁴⁹ Germain & Kyte, *The Cairo Consensus*, p 6.
- ⁵⁰ From a speech by Joan Dunlop, president of the International Women's Health Coalition, at the New England Regional Conference 'Toward Beijing: Priorities '95' held at Harvard University, March 1995.
- ⁵¹ Bunch & Reilly, *Demanding Accountability*, pp 110–111.
- ⁵² InterAction's Commission on the Advancement of Women, *Mobilizing for Beijing '95*, 4, 1995.
- ⁵³ Bunch, 'Organizing for women's human rights', p 145.

