

Women's Rights and Gender at the United Nations: The Case for a new Gender Equality Architecture

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The principle of women's equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex was inscribed in the United Nations from the beginning through the UN Charter in 1945, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. These were unprecedented breakthroughs, but they did not happen without struggle. A handful of women delegates (from Asia, North and South America) attending the UN Charter Conference worked together with 42 non-governmental organizations to ensure inclusion of sex in the anti discrimination clause as well as to change 'equal rights among men' to 'equal rights among men and women.' A similar effort was made in the drafting of the UDHR. (1)

This example of women working across geographic boundaries as well as across the lines of governmental delegates, non-governmental organizations and UN staff members to advance equality is repeated often in the history of women and the UN. Precisely because the numbers of women in governmental delegations have been small, women's organizations and movements have played an important role in bringing the views of women into the UN.

One of the ongoing dilemmas has been whether to pursue women's equality through separate entities or through the other UN bodies. Some have argued that without women specific units, these concerns would be neglected and women's efforts diluted, while others maintain that women will always be marginalized unless gender is mainstreamed into all areas of the UN. History indicates that both strategies are necessary, and indeed should be mutually reinforcing.

Another dilemma has been where to place women and gender in terms of the UN's division of work. The obvious answer is everywhere as such a broad topic does not fall into one box – social, political or economic, rights or development, etc. As Devaki Jain notes: one of women's contributions to the UN has been questioning the knowledge base with its embedded hierarchies and "critiquing ideas such as the dichotomies of development and rights, public and private..." (2) Addressing the inter-relatedness of this topic has fared better as the UN has grappled with the overlapping nature of its work in development, human rights, peace, security, humanitarian affairs, etc.

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I. Women Specific Institutions, Conferences & Standard Setting

Women specific entities and events have primarily driven the agenda on this topic in the UN and have served as the incubator for ideas about women's equality and gender which then often move into the mainstream. Yet, women specific work has largely remained marginalized, and the miniscule resources and power invested in it has plagued efforts to achieve implementation of the high standards repeatedly espoused on this topic. This is a central factor behind the idea of gender equality architecture reform.

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the UN inter-governmental policy body on women, was initially established in 1946 as a sub-commission of the Commission on Human Rights. There was debate amongst supporters about where to place women's rights, but after pressure from NGOS and an appeal by the chair of the sub-commission not to make women dependent on another Commission, where they would end up "in the queue" competing with many other human rights issues, it was made an independent entity that first met in 1947. (3) The mandate of the CSW is to prepare policy recommendations and reports to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on promoting women in political, economic, civil, social and educational fields and on urgent problems of women's rights.

The early years of the CSW laid the groundwork for legal equality with a primary focus on political rights of women – including the right to vote and status in marriage, on access to education and vocational training, and on women's rights as workers. Several declarations and conventions were adopted building in particular on the pioneering work of the International Labor Organization (ILO), and in collaboration with UNESCO. (4) While weak on implementation, these documents began to set standards on women and were often accompanied by the gathering of statistics - the first real data globally on women's status – a critical role that the UN has continued to play.

The work of the CSW was transformed by the UN World Conferences on Women from 1975-95 – see box. In 1987, it began to meet annually, as it was mandated to monitor implementation of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies from the 1985 conference. Much of its work since has focused on monitoring implementation of first Nairobi and then the Beijing Platform for Action from 1995.

The Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) is the unit in the UN Secretariat that provides substantive servicing to the CSW. Based in New York within the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, it elaborates global policies and norms on women mandated by the CSW, ECOSOC, and the General Assembly, and conducts research, prepares reports, and develops policy options as needed. It also promotes and supports the mainstreaming of gender perspectives within the UN system and until 2007 provided substantive and technical servicing to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. (See www.un.org/womenwatch.)

The UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) began as the Voluntary Fund for the UN Decade for Women in 1976 to promote the Decade and support implementation

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in developing countries of the Mexico City Plan of Action. As the only UN Fund mandated solely to assist women, it is a catalyst both within the UN system and through support to innovative activities at the national level. In 1984, it was made a separate operational entity, renamed UNIFEM and placed in association with the UN Development Programme (UNDP). With headquarters in New York, it has regional offices and has grown but is still only present in a limited number of countries. The scope of UNIFEM's work has expanded with a growing understanding of what is vital to development for women, and now includes programmes on women and governance, peace, security and violence against women as well as economic justice. (5)

The International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSRAW), also came out of a recommendation in Mexico City. It was created in 1976 and established its headquarters in the Dominican Republic in 1983. INSTRAW carries out research programmes related to gender and development in areas, such as valuing women's household production, and identifies gaps in order to promote further studies. It also conducts training seminars and has elaborated training materials and methodologies related to research on gender and development.

The Office of the Special Advisor to the Secretary General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI) resulted from a recommendation made at the Beijing Conference that there should be a higher level gender post (Assistant Secretary General) who reported directly to the SG. The office provides leadership for the work on gender mainstreaming and for the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, as well as for the Inter-Agency Task Force on Women, Peace, and Security. It also includes the Focal Point for Women in the Secretariat which works to improve the status of women internally within the UN.

The **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women**, (CEDAW or the Women's Convention as it is commonly called) adopted in 1981 as part of the Decade for Women, is the key international legal instrument on women's rights. CEDAW incorporates the provisions on sex discrimination in previous UN conventions and spells out social and economic as well as political and civil rights for women, addressing the private as well as public sphere. Ratified by 185 governments to date, this treaty also has the largest number of reservations, reflecting state's ambivalence about many of the provisions, especially with regard to culture, family, and reproductive rights.

CEDAW also provides for a Treaty-monitoring body that meets several times a year (in Geneva and New York) to hear and comment on governmental reports on their obligations under the treaty. **The CEDAW Committee**, which is now serviced out of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva, also receives information from NGOs who produce shadow reports about their governments. In 2000, the Convention was strengthened when an Optional Protocol was adopted that allows the committee to hear and act on complaints from individuals on violations of the Convention in countries that have ratified the protocol.

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The **Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW)** is the primary standard setting, but non-binding, instrument on VAW developed by CSW/DAW and adopted by the GA in 1993. VAW was rarely addressed by the UN until the 1990's, but work on it has advanced rapidly since. DEVAW identifies violence in three spheres: family, community, and state. In 1992, the CEDAW Committee adopted a General Recommendation affirming that VAW is a form of sex discrimination, and should be included in states' reports. UNIFEM initiated the InterAgency Trust Fund on the Elimination of VAW in 1996, which provides resources in this area. Comprehensive cross-cultural data on VAW has been collected by the World Health Organization. (6) A Secretary General's study on VAW presented to the General Assembly in 2006 has led to a SG's Global Campaign on VAW and an inter-agency initiative – Stop Rape Now: UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict.

II. Gender Integration and Women's Advances on UN Agendas

Women and gender perspectives have been propelled forward by women specific entities, but they have influenced and been advanced in other areas of the UN as well. Gender integration received a big push from the international women's movement in the 1990's, and the UN mandated 'gender mainstreaming' as "a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes. (7) Most UN agencies created gender focal points and/or programs in this area and advances have been gained from mainstreaming. But there is growing concern that when mainstreaming becomes a substitute for women specific work, women's rights often get diluted. Advocates for a new gender equality architecture seek to create a way that these two approaches complement each other with the women specific work as the driver for the agenda that can also pioneer new issues and approaches. This article looks at gender integration in the UN in three areas.

Development – Given the importance of development within the UN and in the Women's Decade, it has been addressed by women extensively for some time. Initially labeled "women in development (WID)," this work built upon Ester Boserup's 1970 study of women's work that provided evidence of their crucial (but often unrecognized) role in national economic activity and helped to legitimize looking at women's productive (and reproductive) roles in development processes. The integration of women in development was recognized in the plans for the UN's second Development Decade (1970-80) and became a focus not only of the CSW, but also of the Commission for Social Development (CSD) and of the UN's regional commissions. (8)

Planners began to recognize the importance of women to the success of development and the need to include them in design and country-level implementation. But as the feminization of poverty persisted, a feminist critique emerged that went beyond inclusion to looking at how gender was inscribed in models of development in a way that disadvantaged women. This "Gender and Development" (GAD rather than WID) approach put more emphasis on the need to change models of development. (9)

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In the 1990's, women organized to bring feminist critiques into mainstream UN World Conferences. For the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, women held a World Congress to prepare a Women's Agenda 21 and lobbied to ensure that their perspectives were included in the conference's analysis of environmental degradation – linking it to sustainable development and other “economic, political, social and cultural factors.” (10) At the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1995, women again brought their critiques of development – linking the feminization of poverty to the impact of structural adjustment and unfair trade policies. Women's growing influence was also reflected in the UNDP Human Development Report in 1995 focused on “Gender and Human Development,” which launched the Gender Development Index to measure women's status.

Gender mainstreaming has also made considerable progress as part of the health and development concerns of the UN in a number of areas, such as the work on VAW, maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS and sex discrimination in health care. The most controversial aspects of health raised in the context of the UN concern sexual and reproductive health and rights; one of the most significant gender breakthroughs was the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1995 which recognized the centrality of women's rights to population and development.

Yet, in 2000 and again in 2005, women found themselves marginalized at the Millennium Summit and the UN World Summit. Gender equality was one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but the only concrete target set for it was equal access to primary education. The other MDG focused on women - decreasing maternal mortality - only addresses women as child bearers. During the period from 2000-05, many feminists worked to expand the gender equality MDG into seven key target areas and to bring gender perspectives into the others, such as the MDG on HIV/Aids. Nevertheless, the initial draft of the World Summit document in 2005 again failed to address the centrality of women's rights to development until women mobilized to bring gender more fully onto the agenda. Gains were made in the document but governments and the UN still fell far short of both the development and the gender equality goals espoused; this disappointment fueled the move to demand a stronger gender equality architecture at the UN. (11)

Human Rights - Women were primarily seen as part of the social and economic work of the UN, and women's rights were only rarely addressed in the human rights arena before the 1990s. The change in this perception came most forcefully at the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993. With the cold war over and the issue of rape in war gaining media coverage in Bosnia, women seized the opportunity to demand attention to women's rights as human rights. They organized across the North-South divide and in all the regional preparatory processes to ensure that the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action included a strong affirmation of the rights of women as universal human rights, and in particular for the recognition that all forms of violence against women are a violation of human rights. (12)

One of the specific demands in Vienna was for a Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, its Causes and Consequences to report to the Commission on Human Rights

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(CHR) in Geneva. This Rapporteur was appointed in 1994, and her annual reports have elaborated human rights standards on VAW and outlined government's responsibilities to abide by those standards in concrete policy terms, following the parameters outlined in the UN Declaration on VAW. (13) Another call from Vienna was for gender integration into all the work of the human rights machinery - the subject of annual resolutions at the CHR since 1994 and now at the Human Rights Council. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has included a mandate for gender integration from its inception, and a growing number of human rights treaty bodies and special procedures have given attention to the gendered aspects of their mandates, including the Committee on Torture and on Racial Discrimination.

A number of gender related human rights issues have raised important but difficult debates and controversies. The discussion of sexual rights is implicit in the Vienna, Cairo, and Beijing World Conference documents, where reference is made to the right to control over one's sexuality. However, a number of governments have been repudiating the concept of sexual rights as well as seeking to limit reproductive rights in a highly vocal backlash over the past few years at the UN. (14) Meanwhile a number of UN Special Rapporteurs have articulated principles for the application of human rights law in relation to discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity. (15)

Extensive debates over trafficking in persons, and especially women, involving sexual and economic exploitation – issues of prostitution, sex work, human rights, migration and immigration have also been taking place in a number of UN agencies. An operative definition was finally agreed to in the Palermo Protocol that supplements the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime adopted in 2000 and more work is being taken up on this topic. In 2004, the CHR appointed a Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, especially in Women and Children. (16)

The ongoing tension within the UN between the principle of the universality of human rights and respect for cultural specificity, and between the responsibility of the international community to enforce respect for human rights and national sovereignty comes up often when addressing the human rights of women. Many UN documents consistently state variation on the idea that while cultural and religious diversity is to be respected, it is not to be used as a justification for violating human rights, including the rights of women. But the debate continues, and no where are the stakes of this debate clearer than in the resistance often experienced in seeking to realize the human rights of women. (17)

Peace and Security – One of the first issues that women's NGOs addressed in the early days of the UN was peace; it was a prominent theme in the UN Decade for Women, and in 1974, the GA adopted a Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict. (18) Real changes in international law in this area came when the International Tribunals for Bosnia and Rwanda prosecuted rape and sexual violence as war crimes and genocide. The Rome Statute for an International Criminal Court also reflected this gender integration when it named "a broad range of sexual and

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reproductive violence crimes – rape, sexual slavery including trafficking, forced pregnancy, enforced prostitution, enforced sterilization...as among the gravest crimes of war....and [as] crimes against humanity.” (19)

Security Council (SC) Resolution 1325, passed unanimously in 2000, was the first resolution by the SC specifically addressing the impact of war on women and recognizing women's contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace. It calls for involving greater numbers of women in both peace-making and peace-building activities, and UN work to implement this resolution is a focus of both OSAGI and UNIFEM, as well as of other UN entities. In 2008, SC Resolution 1820 on sexual violence in conflict sought to follow-up 1325 and the growing UN concern with VAW by calling for greater UN reporting and attention to this issue. (20)

Gender awareness has also grown in humanitarian assistance. For example, UNHCR began to recognize refugee women as a particular group and issued guidelines on the protection of refugee women in 1992, and for preventing and responding to sexual violence against refugees in 1995. Implementation of such guidelines on the ground amongst both UN and NGO humanitarian workers continues to be the challenge. This challenge was made more explicit as the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse by both UN peacekeepers and NGO personnel was exposed. In response, the Secretary General of the UN commissioned a report on strategies to eliminate abuses in UN peacekeeping, which has resulted in a policy of “Zero Tolerance” for such abuse and the establishment of specialized units addressing personnel conduct in UN missions and the strengthening of mechanisms for investigation and sanction of such abuse. (40) Thus the UN is seeking to address issues of women, peace and security both internally and as the body the world hopes will help to prevent such human rights abuse.

III. Reforming the UN's Gender Architecture

The United Nations has been a galvanizing force in efforts to define a global agenda for women's rights and empowerment in relation to peace and security, human rights, poverty eradication and sustainable development, and there have been significant commitments made over the past decades towards gender equality through this arena. However, while much has progressed since women first fought for their inclusion in the UN Charter, after 60 years of struggle, one could expect more from the body whose power depends on its moral authority and should be leading by example. The UN internal mandate of 50/50 males/females in positions of power by 2000 agreed upon at the Beijing Conference in 1995 has progressed very little; women still make up less than 30% of higher level professional posts and that percentage gets lower the higher up you go.(22).

Most importantly, the UN still lacks a strong, well resourced and coordinated agency or driver for its women's rights and gender equality agenda at the highest levels of leadership, both at Headquarters and in the field. After the UN World Summit and the Beijing+10 reviews held in 2005, women's rights advocates questioned how the UN reform process and Summit outcomes would impact gender equality issues and called for

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addressing the structural inadequacies of UN work on women's rights as part of this process.

In early 2006, Secretary General Kofi Annan appointed a High Level Panel on Coherence and mandated them to look at the UN field level operations in development, humanitarian affairs and environment. Only 3 out of 15 members were women. At the CSW in 2006, women's groups pushed for more women on the panel (which they did not get) but they did succeed in having gender added as a crossing cutting theme to the Panel's work. After hearing from governments, the UN, and women's advocates around the world, the Coherence Panel recommended consolidating and strengthening the gender equality architecture in the UN in its report in November of 2006.

Specifically, the Panel recommended: 1.) A stronger UN entity for women be created through consolidating some of the women's mechanisms that already exist (including the Division for the Advancement of Women [DAW], the Office of the Secretary General's Special Adviser on Gender Issues [OSAGI] and the United Nations Development Fund for Women [UNIFEM] – (INSTRAW was later added to this list); 2.) The new organization would have a dual mandate of both normative and programmatic responsibilities and would operate at both global policy and country levels; 3.) A new Under-Secretary General position be added to head this agency – a higher level status than the leadership of the current UN women's entities, thus enabling high-level representation for women's rights in UN decision-making; and 4.) Ambitiously funding the new organization. (23)

Work toward implementation of the Panel's recommendations in all areas, including those regarding strengthening the gender architecture of the UN, has been quite slow as they involve a number of issues in dispute among governments about UN operations such as methods of funding, governance, and delivering as One UN at the country level. However there has been on-going discussion in informal sessions of the UN General Assembly (GA) throughout 2007-09, resulting in an affirmation by the GA of the need to take action on reforming the Gender Architecture of the UN.

Organizational Options for the new Entity

In 2008 and 2009, the Deputy Secretary-General's Office produced two 'Options Papers' on structural recommendations for models for a new women's entity which has been the subject of considerable debate over the past year. The Options Papers set out **four models** : A) Maintaining the status quo; B.) Creating an autonomous fund/programme; C.) Creating a department within the Secretariat; D.) Creating a "composite" (previously called a "hybrid") entity that combines aspects of 2 and 3. (24)

NGOs who have worked for the creation of a new entity primarily through the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) Campaign have advocated for the fourth option (Composite or Hybrid), with a focus on ensuring that the entity has substantial resources (both human and financial), high-level leadership and an extensive field presence, in order to drive the gender equality and women's empowerment agenda and effectively

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deliver results for women on the ground. (25) Creating one women-specific independent entity with the dual mandate of combining normative, analytical, and monitoring functions with policy advisory and programming functions should lead to stronger, more effective, better linked and less fragmented UN work on women's rights and empowerment. The entity would coordinate a UN strategy of both gender mainstreaming in other UN bodies and women-specific work, and see its work as cross-cutting in all areas of the UN: development, health, human rights, peace & security, etc.

On September 14, 2009 - the last day of the 63rd General Assembly, a resolution was adopted that "strongly supports" the creation of a consolidated gender entity based on the composite - option D and calls upon the Secretary General to produce a proposal spelling out its particulars to be submitted to intergovernmental negotiations. The resolution also "supports that the composite entity shall be led by an Under Secretary General." Member States and the Secretary General have affirmed their preference for the composite entity as the one that formally links normative and operational functions, combining B and C and must now proceed to develop the plans and resolve the outstanding issues of its governance and funding.

One of the thorniest political issues is how the new entity would be governed. *Most UN entities are either governed as part of the UN Secretariat (under the SG's office which reports to the GA and other bodies), and commonly known as part of the normative and policy making branch of the UN such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Or they are a Fund or Program with a governing Board made up of government representatives, and commonly called the operational side of the UN, such as UNICEF or UNFPA. There are many variations on these structures that in fact blend both normative and operational functions, especially in the area of policy making, but they are governed as one type or the other.*

The idea of a hybrid or composite has been to explicitly create a blend merging operational and normative functions structurally, as well as in practice. The current proposal is that it would report both through the SG to the GA, ECOSOC and CSW as well as have an executive board like that of UNDP/UNFPA or UNICEF for operational matters. Governments are debating whether to create a new Executive Board or to have the entity report to one of the existing boards, and if so, which. NGOS want to ensure that the Board have real expertise in gender equality, be regionally diverse; take account of the entity's broad mandate and universal coverage; and provide systematically for meaningful participation of civil society.

Another of the critical issues is how the new entity should work in the field in order to have "universal coverage with strategic presence" since it can only begin with a limited number of country offices. While those offices would probably begin in the UN regional Hubs and in key countries of the Global South (including where UNIFEM already operates), it is generally accepted that the entity must have a universal mandate to address women's rights in all countries since none have achieved full gender equality. The entity should carry out targeted or catalytic programming activities in countries where the UN is already present, working with the UNCT in shaping policies on gender, as well as

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working through the national women's machinery and other UN agencies, especially in countries where the UN does not have country offices.

Perhaps most critical for an effective field presence is the question of "ambitious" funding and what will be needed to ensure that the entity will have stable and predictable resources. While it is generally agreed that the entity will have funds from both assessed (UN dues already committed to some of the existing women's bodies) and voluntary contributions, the expansion of an effective field presence will require significant increases in voluntary contributions beyond what the existing units have. Within these voluntary funds, a substantial amount of it needs to be "core" contributions (as opposed to earmarked funding that is project specific) to ensure that the entity can fund its staff as well as programmatic activities with a high degree of predictability.

NGOs advocate for a minimum of US\$ 1 billion in funding for the new gender entity in the first phase of development, as well as substantial annual increases built into the process to expand to more countries over time. The European GEAR focal point has noted that the current funding of the four existing women's units is roughly \$221 million – less than 1% of the \$27 Billion that the UN and all its agencies currently spend. Another comparison is made with UNICEF which has a budget in excess of \$3billion. (26)

Finally civil society, particularly women's groups but also including human rights and development organizations, have been actively involved in this process. There is a need for systematic and meaningful participation of civil society representatives in the governance as well as in the operations of the new women's entity, both for more accountability and for input from those most involved with work on women's empowerment. In order to deliver for women everywhere, it is critical to tap into this expertise and the insights of a diverse and wide-ranging NGO constituency, including grassroots women. Suggestions for this include creating Civil Society Advisory bodies at global, regional and national levels as well as developing a mechanism for on-going input from NGOs.

In the coming year (2009-2010), the GA and the SG's office must decide how to advance the gender architecture resolution, to appoint a USG, resolve the remaining issues, and begin creating the entity which will alter considerably the women's units described here. Both how they implement this process and how vigorously the mandate for "gender mainstreaming" is pursued by the Secretary General and in UN Country Teams as the One UN is further developed will be significant markers for the UN's work in this area in the future. Another test is how well governments and the UN proceed to integrate gender and advance women in the recently created Peace Building Commission, the Human Rights Council and in attempts to implement the MDGs by 2015. The UN remains an important arena in women's pursuit of justice and human rights; progress globally has repercussions nationally, and vice versa. The UN has provided a venue where high standards around gender equality and the human rights of women have been elaborated, but the challenge is how to implement these goals within the UN, and in the every day lives of women and girls around the world.

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22. Office of the Focal Point for Women in the United Nations, www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/fpgenderbalancestats.htm; For information on numbers of women in Parliaments compiled by the Inter-parliamentary Union, see www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm.

23. Delivering as One: Report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and the Environment, (NY: UN, 9 November 2006)

24. *Institutional Options to Strengthen United Nations Work on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women*, UN Deputy Secretary-General. 23 July 2008; Further Details on Institutional Options for Strengthening the Institutional Arrangements for Support of Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, DSG, 5 March, 2009. |

25. The GEAR Campaign represents over 400 organizations from around the world, has global and regional focal points, and a New York Lobbying Group that strategize, share information and gather support for the campaign. It is co-facilitated by the Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) and the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO). For more info, <http://gear.groupsite.com/main/summary>.

26. European Focal Point of the UN Gender Equality Architecture Reform Campaign, 2009, <http://www.un-gear.eu:80/>.

BOX: Women and Gender terminology

Even the terms of this discussion are problematic, but the distinction between women and gender is important – and often misunderstood. “Women” are an identifiable group based on biological sex, while “gender” refers to the ways in which roles, attitudes, privileges, and relationships regarding women and men are socially constructed, and gender shapes the experience of males as well as females. For example, one can speak of the need to empower women as a defined group and to increase their numbers in decision-making, while gender is more appropriately used to talk about how social attitudes shape perceptions of issues and of who gets invited to the table. Men as well as women can be (or not be) “gender conscious.” To be aware of the impact of gender and committed to women’s equality is at the core of a political perspective called “feminism.”

Box: Conferences, Years, and Decades

International Women's Year: A number of factors led to the declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year (IWY): Equality, Development, and Peace. The UN had designated several theme years and the second UN Development Decade had just begun

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when a group of Eastern and Western European women concerned with peace during the Cold War suggested designating a women's year. Many women in North and South America in the midst of a feminist resurgence took it up and women from newly independent states in Asia and Africa saw it as an opportunity to address women's role in development.

*The first **World Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975** was ground breaking in bringing global attention to a multitude of issues raised by the 8000+ people who attended the conference and/or the NGO parallel Tribune. Government delegations - 73% female and primarily headed by women – brought many into the orbit of the UN for the first time; both events introduced activists to the potential of pursuing their interests through the UN, at a time when there were few international venues for women. The conference Plan of Action called for a **UN Decade for Women: 1976-85**, and over 100 governments set up “national institutions” dealing with policy, research and programs on women during IWY.*

*Awareness-raising about women's status prevailed even amidst differences in Mexico, but the **Mid-decade Conference on Women in Copenhagen in 1980** brought out the heat in debates North-South, as well as over political divisions, especially around Israel. Nevertheless, especially at the NGO Forum, women listened and networked - a learning experience that prepared the groundwork for greater understanding of the enormous diversity of women and their needs.*

*The **Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985** ushered in the era of the international women's movement, with its diverse regional and global manifestations. Women's groups and feminist leaders had been emerging over the decade in all regions, and Southern voices now took center stage. The vibrant NGO forum embraced women's diversity as strength and reflected the growing consensus that all issues are women's issues and all would benefit from gender analysis. The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women Towards 2000 coming out of the Inter-governmental conference contained a detailed and sophisticated approach to achieving women's equality. The **UN Decade for Women** proved to be a critical catalyst for women's organizing, providing resources, space, and legitimization of the issue nationally, as well as bringing women together regionally and globally.*

*The **Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995** showcased this movement and consolidated its gains on the UN agenda. The largest UN conference held to date, it had delegations from 189 governments and 17,000 people representing governments, NGOs, journalists, and UN personnel in attendance. Meanwhile some 35,000+ people attended the parallel NGO Forum. Beijing illustrated the enormous interest in this topic globally as well as exposed its controversial aspects and the growing political strength of opponents to women's rights. The Beijing Platform for Action covers the human rights of women in 12 critical areas of concern, ranging from poverty and education to violence against women and armed conflict, and including the girl child. The CSW has conducted two reviews of implementation of the Beijing Platform – in 2000 and 2005, which reaffirmed the Platform and added to it in areas, such as HIV/Aids.*