

GENDER EQUALITY AND THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM



The United Nations (UN) was founded in 1946 in response to the need for formal relationships committed to maintaining peace and improving people's lives. Today, the UN consists of 191 Member States and plays a prominent role in economic and social fields, encouraging international cooperation on common concerns, undertaking research and implementing programs world wide. One of the UN's founding pledges was to "reaffirm faith in equal rights of women and men".

The UN is a complex network of agencies and organizations. The **General Assembly (GA)** is the highest decision-making body of the UN, in which all Member States of the UN are represented. The **Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)** is the coordinating body for several smaller functional commissions, such as those overseeing human rights. One of these is the **Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)**.

Other autonomous and specialized parts of the UN common system, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Health Organization (WHO), also have links to ECOSOC. International, regional and some national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may be granted consultative status by ECOSOC. This status is accorded on the basis of international networking and recognized expertise in subjects covered by ECOSOC. It enables NGOs to attend meetings, submit statements, receive UN documentation, speak before meetings, issue papers and lobby delegates. Many groups have consultative status with the CSW.

COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN (CSW)

The CSW was created in 1947 to promote women's rights in political, economic, social and educational fields, to monitor the situations of women around the world and make recommendations on issues requiring immediate attention in the area of women's rights. The Commission also functions as the preparatory

body for world conferences and other high level events.

The CSW carries out its functions in two ways:

- it provides a forum for an exchange of views and the sharing of successful experiences and accomplishments. As such, it establishes a network on which to draw for domestic policy development and it encourages governments to make public commitments to women; and
- it provides policy direction for the work of the UN itself and puts pressure on governments to sustain and enhance their efforts to improve the situation of women.

The CSW has been a catalyst in the development of international gender equality standards. One of the most significant accomplishments of the CSW is the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)*. The Convention sets minimum acceptable standards necessary to guarantee women equal rights with men in public and political life, including: education, health, employment, marriage and family. To strengthen accountability to CEDAW, an *Optional Protocol* was adopted in 2000 and provides both an inquiry procedure and a complaints mechanism.

Following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the GA mandated CSW to integrate a regular review of the 12 critical areas of concern of the *Beijing Platform for Action* into its programme.

The CSW consists of 45 Member States. Canada has been elected to serve several terms on the Commission over the years, most recently from 2003 to 2005.

OTHER RESPONSIBILITY POINTS FOR WOMEN

The **Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women** is a formally established body of 23 experts who examine progress in the implementation of CEDAW.

The **Office of the Special Advisor to the Secretary General on Gender Initiatives and Advancement of Women (OSAGI)** has two main objectives: to promote and strengthen the effective implementation of the *Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action* and the Beijing+5 Outcome Document and related agreements such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by providing expert advice to the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW); and to oversee and monitor gender mainstreaming throughout the UN system.

The **Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)** is the Secretariat that services the CSW and the CEDAW Committee.

The **United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)** is a program operating in association with the **UN Development Program (UNDP)**. It supports innovative and experimental women's projects and serves as a catalyst to ensure the involvement of women in the mainstream development activities.

The **United Nations Development Programme** has produced **Human Development Reports (HDR)** since 1990, with the aim of promoting a people-centred development process in terms of economic debate, policy and advocacy. The Report contains four key composite indices for human development — the Human Development Index, the Gender-related Development Index, the Gender Empowerment Measure, and the Human Poverty Index.