



A SHORT HISTORY OF THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN



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Secretaries-General of the Women's Conferences. Top, left to right: Helvi Sipilä (Finland), First World Conference on Women, Mexico City; Lucille Mair (Jamaica), Second World Conference on Women, Copenhagen. Bottom, left to right: Leticia Ramos-Shahani (Philippines), Third World Conference on Women, Nairobi; Gertrude Mongella (Tanzania), Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing. Photos: UN Photo.

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1946: BIRTH OF THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

United Nations commitments to the advancement of women began with the signing of the United Nations Charter in San Francisco in 1945. In its preamble, it reaffirms “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small”. Of the 160 signatories, only four were women—Minerva Bernardino (Dominican Republic), Virginia Gildersleeve (United States), Bertha Lutz (Brazil) and Wu Yi-Fang (China). Two of them, Bertha Lutz and Minerva Bernardino, had proposed to add “women” to the founding document of the United Nations.

During the inaugural meetings of the United Nations General Assembly in London in February 1946, Eleanor Roosevelt, a United States delegate, read an open letter addressed to “the women of the world”:

To this end, we call on the Governments of the world to encourage women everywhere to take a more active part in national and international affairs, and on women who are conscious of their opportunities to come forward and share in the work of peace and reconstruction as they did in war and resistance.

A few days later, the Subcommittee on the Status of Women was established under the Commission on Human Rights. Many women delegates and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) believed nevertheless that a separate body specifically dedicated to women’s issues was necessary. The first chairperson of the Subcommittee, Bodil Begtrup (Denmark), also requested the Economic and Social Council in May 1946 for a change to full commission status:

[Women’s] problems have now for the first time in history to be studied internationally as such and to be given the social importance they ought to have. And it would be, in the opinion of this Subcommittee of experts in this field, a tragedy to spoil this unique opportunity by confusing the wish and the facts. Some situations can be changed by laws, education, and public opinion, and the time

seems to have come for happy changes in conditions of women all over the world (...).¹

On 21 June 1946, the Subcommittee formally became the Commission on the Status of Women. As a full-fledged commission under the Economic and Social Council, it was dedicated to ensuring women’s equality and promoting women’s rights. Its mandate was to “prepare recommendations and reports to the Economic and Social Council on promoting women’s rights in political, economic, civil, social and educational fields” and to make recommendations on “urgent problems requiring immediate attention in the field of women’s rights”.²

Shortly thereafter, the Section on the Status of Women was established in the Human Rights Division of the United Nations Secretariat to provide secretariat functions. It became the Division for the Advancement of Women in 1978 before being consolidated into UN Women in 2010.



Above left: Delegates to the seventh session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. Above right: The San Francisco Conference, 25 April - 26 June 1945, Bertha Lutz, member of the delegation from Brazil, addresses the meeting of Commission I, Committee 2, held on 15 June 1945. Photos: UN Photo.

1947-1962: SECURING THE LEGAL FOUNDATIONS OF GENDER EQUALITY

First session: the Commission meets at Lake Success

The Commission on the Status of Women first met at Lake Success, New York, from 10 to 24 February 1947. At that session, all 15 government representatives were women, giving the Commission the unique character of gathering a majority of women delegates, a distinction it has maintained throughout its history.

From its inception, the Commission forged a close relationship with NGOs. Several international women's organizations addressed the Commission at the first session, and from then on, NGOs in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council were invited to participate as observers. In the 1950s, the average number of NGOs attending sessions rose to between 30 and 50. Openness to civil society has continued to the present as the Commission continues to allow NGO contributions to be incorporated in its work and outcomes.

The 15 original members of the first session of the Commission 10 – 24 February 1947, held at Lake Success, New York

Mrs. Jessie Mary Grey Street, Australia
Mrs. Evdokia Uralova, Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic
Mrs. Way Sung New, China
Mrs. Graciela Morales F. de Echeverria, Costa Rica
Mrs. Bodil Begtrup, Denmark
Mrs. Marie Helene Lefauchaux, France
Miss Sara Basterrechea Ramirez, Guatemala
Begum Shareefah Hamid Ali, India
Mrs. Amalia C. de Castillo Ledon, Mexico
Mrs. Alice Kandalf Cosma, Syria
Mrs. Mihri Pektas, Turkey
Mrs. Elizavieta Alekseevna Popova, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
Miss Mary Sutherland, United Kingdom
Miss Dorothy Kenyon, United States
Mrs. Isabel Urdaneta, Venezuela

From the beginning, the Commission built working relationships with the (then) Commission on Human Rights and its Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, the Social Commission (later renamed the Commission for Social Development), international human rights treaty bodies, and United Nations organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). The Chairperson of the Commission on the Status of Women was invited to attend the early sessions of the Commission on Human Rights devoted to finalizing the draft international bill of human rights. Copies of preliminary drafts were circulated among members of the Commission on the Status of Women.³

During its first session, the Commission declared as one of its guiding principles:

*to raise the status of women, irrespective of nationality, race, language or religion, to equality with men in all fields of human enterprise, and to eliminate all discrimination against women in the provisions of statutory law, in legal maxims or rules, or in interpretation of customary law.*⁴

Drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

During the first session of the Commission, members affirmed that it should engage in upcoming discussions on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Contributing to the drafting of the international bill of rights became one of the Commission's first tasks. In revising the articles sent to them for comments, Commission members inserted gender-sensitive language—arguing against references to “men” as a synonym for humanity and phrases like “men are brothers.”⁵ They encountered resistance from members of the Commission on Human Rights, but succeeded in introducing new, more inclusive language,⁶ a truly ground-breaking achievement from a historical perspective.

The Commission focuses on women's rights

From 1946 to 1962, the Commission focused its attention on promoting women's rights and equality by setting standards and formulating international conventions. These were aimed at changing discriminatory legislation and fostering global awareness of women's issues. The codification of the legal rights of women, however, needed to be supported by data and analysis on the extent of discrimination against women in law and practice.

The Commission thus embarked on a vast research and polling effort to assess the status of women worldwide.⁷ Several questionnaires and studies were launched to collect information on the legal status of women, their access to education, their work opportunities and their civil rights. United Nations Member States provided the Commission with statistics, while NGOs and United Nations entities provided additional information, especially of a more qualitative nature. These fact-finding efforts produced a detailed, country-by-country picture of the political and legal status of women, which over time became the basis for drafting human right instruments.⁸

Providing women universal access to political rights

The Commission made women's political rights a high priority in its early years of work. In 1945, only 25 of the original 51 Member States allowed women equal voting rights. In his 1950 report to the Commission on discrimination against women in the field of political rights, the United Nations Secretary-General noted that in 22 countries, women still did not have equal

Removing discrimination in marriage

Throughout the 1950s, the Commission turned its attention to discrimination in marriage. United Nations reports revealed that discrimination against women was frequently due to differences between national laws on family residence, marriage and divorce. The Commission embraced this problem by drafting the Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (adopted on 29 January 1957),¹¹ followed by the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (adopted on 7 November 1962),¹² and the Recommendation on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (adopted on 1 November 1965).¹³ Together these measures represented the first international agreements on women's rights in marriage.

Other areas of the Commission's work

During the same period, the Commission worked with UNESCO to develop programmes and advocate for increasing women's literacy and equality in access to education. It also undertook work on women's economic rights. A study launched in collaboration with ILO led to the 1951 Convention on Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value, which enshrined the principle of equal pay for work of equal value.¹⁴

In the early 1950s, the Commission also began focusing on traditional practices harmful to women and girls. Due to its efforts, resolutions were adopted by the Economic and Social Council in 1952 and the General

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