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Gender Concerns in United Nations: An Institutional History

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Abstract:

The United Nations, as an International Organization has been an active participant in the debates surrounding gender, security, development etc. As a global standard setter, as a forum for debate, and as an unparalleled source of comprehensive data on the status of women worldwide, the UN is a unique one. The UN Charter, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, international conferences on women and the creation of women specific institutions like UN Women, encapsulates some of the efforts made by UN at the multilateral level on gender. The present paper examines in close detail as to how the UN organization has used addressed questions related to gender. Focusing on organizational initiatives and programmes, the paper looks at the dynamics which influence the ability of the UN to work in the area of gender.

Keywords: Gender, Security, Hard Core Politics, UN Women, UNIFEM, Gender mainstreaming, Hegemonic Masculinity Culture.

Background

The United Nations system comprising of multiple specialized organizations occupies an important place in shaping the international discourse on gender. As a global standard setter, as a forum for debate, and as an unparalleled source of comprehensive data on the status of women worldwide, the UN is undoubtedly unique. The UN *Charter*, the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* (1948), international conferences on women and the creation of women specific institutions like UN Women in 2011, encapsulates some of the efforts made at the multilateral level on gender. The present paper examines in close detail as to how the UN organization has used addressed questions related to gender. Focusing on organizational initiatives and programmes, the paper looks at the dynamics which influence the ability of the UN to work in the area of gender.

Legal and Structural Framework

The United Nations Charter and Women

The Preamble of the Charter of the UN, signed on 26 June 1945, states in its opening lines: 'We the peoples of the UN' and reaffirms not only 'faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of human person, in the equal rights of men and women.' The equality of rights is also explicitly asserted in other Articles of the Charter. Article 3 of the Charter calls upon the need for "international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion" (UN Charter 1945:3). Similarly, Article 8 of the Charter calls for the United Nations not to place 'restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate in any capacity and under conditions of equality in its principal and subsidiary organs.'

Although international and Intergovernmental bodies had begun working to advance the status of women long before 1945, no previous legal document had so forcefully affirmed the equality of all human beings, or specifically outlawed sex as a basis for discrimination (UN 1996:3). Incidentally, the San Francisco conference where the Charter was finally adopted was totally a male affair. In fact there were only four women among the one hundred and sixty other representatives. They were: Minerva Bernardino from Dominican Republic, Virginia Gildersleeve from United States, Bertha Lutz from Brazil and Wu Yi-fang from China. For the women present at the birth of the UN, the Charter's provisions for gender equality offered a clear and compelling basis for the assertion of international law to advance the political and legal status of women (UN 1996:3).

Gender Issues on the UN Agenda

The organizational structure of the UN system. The UN has six principal organs (the General Assembly, Security Council, Economic and Social Council, International Court of Justice, Trusteeship Council and the Secretariat) apart from other specialized agencies like World Health organization (WHO), International Labor Organization (ILO) working in different areas of gender. Together, they perform many important tasks that address issues and concerns related to women and the problems they face. However, some organs like the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council take a lead over others such as the Security Council in the work undertaken on gender.

The Security Council, the principal organ of the UN with the explicit mandate to undertake action for securing peace, has only recently engaged with the question of gender. The Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) that addresses woman's role in war and peace is the first real instance of the broadening of the concerns on security issues by the Council. Collectively, the UN system because of its near universal membership offers an ideal forum for debate and discussions for gender advocacy.

The General Assembly

The UN General Assembly is one of the most important organs within the UN system that directly takes up questions related to gender. Article 13(b) of the UN Charter specifically mandates the General Assembly the 'promoting international co-operation in the economic, social, cultural, educational, and health fields, an assisting in the realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.' In this context, the General Assembly has adopted many resolutions and conventions concerning women.

In 1946, during the inaugural meetings of the UN General Assembly in London, the issue of women's rights appeared as a prominent item on the international agenda for the first time since the end of the Second World War. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, representing the United States of America, appeared before the General Assembly and read an open letter addressed to 'women of the world' that she and sixteen other women attending the session had prepared. The open letter, dated 12th February 1946, hailed the coming of peace to a democratic world and the vital role that women had played in making victory possible. 'This new chance for peace' the letter pointed out, 'was won through the joint efforts of men and women working for the common ideals of human freedom at a time when need for united effort broke down barriers of race, creed and sex'. The first paragraph of the letter expressed the hope that women's involvement in the UN 'may grow and may increase in sight and skill.' It called on Governments 'to encourage women everywhere to take a more active part in national and international affairs'. Several delegations spoke strongly in support of these views, urging that the organizations bring more women into work (UN 1996: 11).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the General Assembly on 10th December 1948 gave a boost to the UN's commitment towards women. The UDHR focused on gender equality and argued against the gender insensitive language, such as references to men as a synonym for humanity and the phrases like 'all men are brothers'. The Declaration offered what the General Assembly called a common standard of achievements for all people and all nations. It elaborated on the principles already set out in the UN Charter, such as enjoyment of all human rights and freedom by all without any distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. The UDHR was followed subsequently by the two separate Covenants in 1966 -the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, that included provisions specifying the rights applicable equally to men and women.

The General Assembly also proclaimed 1976-85 as the UN Decade for Women. The proclamation served to promote and legitimize the international women's movement and helped raise women's issues at the forefront of world attention. On 18 December 1979, the General Assembly, adopted the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW), by a vote of 10 to none, with 11 abstentions. The Convention made it binding on signatory Governments to take all appropriate measures, including legislation,

to ensure the full development and advancement of women and to guarantee them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men. The Convention was the first international legal instrument to define discrimination against women, which it described as any distinct, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.

Table: General Assembly Resolutions on Women

Issues Areas	General Assembly Resolutions	Year
Human Rights	1- A/RES/217 (III) The Universal Declaration of Human	1948
	2-2-A/RES/1040(XI) Convention on the Nationality of Married Women	1957
	3-A/RES/1763(XVII) Convention on consent of Marriage, minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages	1962
	4-A/RES/2200(XXI) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	1966
	5-A/RES/2200(XXI) International Covenant on Economic and Political Rights	1966
	6-A/RES/63/116 Declaration on the 16th Anniversary of Universal Declaration of Human Rights	2008
Development	A/RES/41/128 Declaration on the Right to Development	
Violation against Women	1-A/RES/2263(XXII) Declaration of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women	1967
	2-A/RES/34/180 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	1979
	3-A/RES/317(IV) Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in	1949

	persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of others	
	4-A/RES/48/104 Declaration on the Elimination of violence Against Women	1993
	5-NRES/52/86 Model Strategies and Practical Measures on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the field of Crimes and Prevention and Crime Justice	1997
	6-A/RES/54/4 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women: Optional Protocol	1999
	7-A/RES/64/293 United Nations Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons	2010
Peace and Conflict	A/RES/3318(XXIX) Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict	1974
Political Participation	A/RES/640(VII) Convention on Political Rights of Women	1952

Source: General Assembly, Various years.

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

The ECOSOC like General Assembly has also a mandate that concerns gender issues. The ECOSOC has a functional commission named as Commission on Status of Women (CSW) that is dedicated exclusively to gender equality and advancement of women. Established by ECOSOC resolution 11 (2) of 21 June 1946 with the aim to prepare recommendations and reports to the Council on promoting woman's rights in political, economic, social, civil and educational fields, the Commission also makes recommendations to the Council on urgent problems requiring immediate attention in the field of woman's rights. The Commission's mandate was expanded in 1987 by ECOSOC resolution 1987/22 to monitoring and implementing measures for the advancement of women and reviewing and appraising progress made at the national, sub regional, regional and global levels (CSW 2007). The early years of CSW laid the groundwork for legal equality with a primary focus on political rights of women- including the rights to vote and the status in marriage, on access to education, vocational training, and on rights as workers. It was on its recommendation that year 1975 was designated International Woman's Year (IWY). The Commission's working relationship with other UN bodies

like Commission for Social Development, and Trusteeship Council: UN agencies such as International Labor Organization (ILO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and various non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations, such as Inter-American Commission of Women, ensured cross cultural and inter-agency cooperation on gender (UN 1996:12).

The Secretariat

The role of the Secretariat has been crucial because of its many responsibilities, which includes preparation of reports, providing services for meetings and conferences, helping to formulate policy and creating follow-up mechanisms. Despite a number of organizational moves over the years, there was no specialized wing till 1972 dealing specifically with issues related to women. It was only in 1972 that the first moves towards this was made when the first woman appointed to the post of Assistant Secretary General was made head of newly created Center for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, which included responsibility for woman's affairs (UN 1996: 15).

UN Conferences on Women

There have been four World Conferences on Women held so far; these conferences and a wide range of women's participation in these conferences have ensured to large extent the deepening of UN's engagement with gender.

The First world conference on women was held in Mexico City in 1975. Delegations from 133 member states attended the conference, 113 of them headed by women of the 2000 delegates, 73 percent were female. The Conference represented the first major step in a worldwide attempt to achieve equality between men and women and to end separation of the sexes in matters of education, opportunity, and economics priorities. The success of the Mexico Conference laid the basis for a more engaged and permanent system of periodic conferences under the aegis of the UN in the coming years.

The Second World Conference on Women was held in Copenhagen in 1980 focusing primarily on three areas of concern - health, employment and education. These issues came to the fore out of a sense that the broad goals of equality, development and peace enumerated at the Mexico City Conference could not be achieved unless they were refined into specific, highly focused objectives for women (UN 1996: 43-46).

The Third World Conference on Women was held in Nairobi in the year 1985, which reviewed and appraised the achievements and the obstacles in the realization of goals promulgated in the UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace. The 'Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies For the Advancement of Women Towards 2000' coming out of the intergovernmental conference contained a detailed and sophisticated approach as to how the goals and objectives of securing women's development could required (Bunch 2007). Participants in the conference included delegations from 157 member's states and representatives of the UN secretariat, regional commissions, 4 national liberation movements and 163 NGOs (UN 1996:46).

The Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing. The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, adopted unanimously by 189 countries, consolidated five decades of legal advances aimed at securing the equality of women and men in law and in fact. More than 47,000 people attended the intergovernmental meeting. The Beijing Conference was in fact the largest gathering ever held of Government and NGOs representatives (UN 1996: 63-64). The Beijing Declaration focused on the human rights of women in twelve critical areas of concerns from poverty and education to violence against women, women in conflicts etc. (Bunch 2007). These World Conferences on Women, the participation of women in these conferences and the women's movement in the 1990s had a far reaching consequences, it changed the structure and politics world wide. Gender became a focal point in all policies and programmes of the UN.

UN Women

In July 2010, the General Assembly formally created UN Women, by merging four existing agencies: Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) into one agency focusing exclusively on gender equality and woman's empowerment. UN Women is governed by multi-tiered into one agency focusing exclusively on gender equality and woman's empowerment. It is governed by multi-tiered governance structure such as General Assembly, Economic and Social Council and the Commission on the Status on Women which shall constitute intergovernmental governance for normative guidance to the Entity (UN Women 2011 c).

1. Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW): Located in New York within the Department of Economic and Social affairs; DAW concerned itself with research and advocacy work at the UN. It aims to ensure the participation of women as equal partner with men in all aspects of human endeavor. It promotes women as equal participants and beneficiaries of sustainable development, peace and security, governance and human rights (UNDAW 2005).

2. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM): The UNIFEM began as the Voluntary Fund for the UN Decade for women in 1976 providing direct and practical assistance to women in developing countries. In 1984 this Voluntary Fund was renamed by the General Assembly as the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and authorized as a permanent, autonomous body. UNIFEM works on the premise that is the fundamental rights of every woman to live a life discrimination and violence, and that gender equality is essential to achieving development and building just societies. It works on the thematic areas like enhancing women's economic security and rights, ending violence against women, reducing the prevalence of HIV/AIDS against women and girls, advancing gender justice in democratic governance in stable and fragile states (UN Women 2011d).

3. The Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI): The Beijing Deceleration came out with a very important recommendation that there should be a higher level gender post reporting directly to the Secretary General. The office provides leadership for the work on gender mainstreaming 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 (Bunch 2007).

4. The International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW): The need for the improvement in training and research especially related to women and issues which were given birth to the institution like INSTRAW, an UN affiliated institution. INSTRAW carries out research programmes related to gender and development areas and it also conducts training seminars and has elaborated training materials and methodologies related to research on gender and development (Bunch 2007).

Gender mainstreaming within the UN

In the highly sectarianized the UN system, women and their concerns and perspective have been just that: a sector. In the male dominated world of international politics and economics, that sector was easily marginalized (Reanda 1999:51). But due to the sensible work done by CSW, Women's movement, World conferences on Women impacted a lot on the issues areas of the UN basically human rights, development, peace and conflict etc and Women concerns integrated in these issues areas. Gender mainstreaming established as a major global strategy for the promotion of gender equality in the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) has been defined as:

The process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is 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 in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. While mainstreaming is clearly essential for securing essential for securing human rights and social justice for women as well as men, it also increasing recognized that incorporating gender perspective in different areas for development ensure the effective achievement of other social and economic goals (UN 2008).

Development

The Human Development Report is prepared annually under the auspices of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and dedicated to ending the mismatch between progress, development and economic growth (Reanda 1999:55). People are the wealth of the nation. Their choices and the lives they lead are important. To examine women and their role in development issues, the Women and Development (WAD) approach emerged in the second half of 1970s. This was supplemented by the Women in Development (WID) approach. In the 1980s Gender and Development (GAD) approach emerged as an alternative to these approaches. In GAD approach women are seen as agents for change rather than passive recipients of development assistance (Zwart 1992, Razavi and Miller 1995, Pietila 2007).

The shift in international approaches to development, and to women's role in it, began to crystallize in the International Development Strategy for the Fourth Development Decade, adopted in 1990, which recognized that the success of development policies necessitates a more participatory and people centered approach, as well as respect for human rights and equality between men and women (Reanda 1999). Without the advancement of women, development itself becomes difficult to achieve. At its 1992 session, the CSW called for the adoption of gender-aware international economic and social policies, and requested its members to influence actively the deliberations of the major UN conferences on environment, on social development, and on population that were to be held in following years (Reanda 1999:56). But still women issues were occasionally addressed. The shift from exclusively women concerning approach to gender related approaches have become acceptable in almost all issue areas including development.

Millennium Development Goals and Women

The Millennium Declaration of 2000 and the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) collectively herald a vision for a more just and equal world: a promise by governments in 189 countries to achieve social justice for all by 2015. The Millennium Declaration has eight goals and every one goal connects up with the larger objective of gender equality. Tackling poverty and hunger MDG-1 depends on improving access to decent work, particularly for women and young people, and on securing access to assets, including land. The MDG target on health and education (MDGs 2,3,4,5 and 6) cannot be met unless all girls have the chance to go to school and women's sexual and reproductive health rights are addressed. Tackling child mortality (MDG 4) depends on improving the status and well being of women. Progress on combating HIV and AIDS (MDG-6) requires action against violence on women in all its forms. Since women usually bear the burden of collecting water (MDG-7), improving access to water is essential for enabling girls to attend school, and for women to be able to gain paid employment and participate in their communities. Progress on the goals underpins women's social and economic empowerment and access to decision making at all levels (MDG-3) (UNIFEM 2010:3).

Human Rights

The UN has always been concerned in institutionalizing the principles highlighted in the UN Charter and the UDHR. The adoption of convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women in the General Assembly was also remarkable in area of human rights concerning for women. The Vienna world conferences on human rights³ and Beijing world conferences on Women also put great emphasis on women rights as human rights. Recommendations were made for the inclusion of gender perspective in the work human rights treaties and bodies, the rapporteurs and working groups of the commission on Human Rights, and in the relevant activities of the High Commissioner and the center for Human Rights, and for closer inter-secretariat cooperation (Reanda 1999: 58).

Peace and conflict

While gender and women concerns have been included in the development and human rights frameworks, this is only beginning to happen in the case of peace and security. Although 1325 resolution of Security Council has been remarkable in recognizing the role women in peace and security and also calls the members states to end violence against women in conflicting situation, it is yet to be implemented satisfactorily by states. In this context, it would be useful to keep in mind the campaigns taken up by the UN in this regard. For example, on February 2008, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban ki-Moon launched the campaign Unite to End Violence against Women, covering the period 2008-15, with the overall objective of raising public awareness and increasing the political will and resources for preventing and responding to all forms of Violence against women and girls in all parts of the world. The Secretary General called on governments, civil society, women's organizations, young people, the private sector, artists, the media, the entire UN system, and individual women and men, to join forces in addressing the global pandemic of violence against women and girls (UN 2009: 1)

Concluding Observations

Representation of Women within the UN

Only 39.9 percent of the UN staff consists of women in UN (UN Women 2011e). Although it has been clearly mentioned in Articles 8 and 10 that there shall be no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate under conditions of equality in its principals and subsidiary organs, the commitment to gender equity within the UN system has yet to be achieved (OSAGI 2010). In 1997, out of 185 national delegations represented in the General Assembly, only six were headed by women ambassadors; there was no woman ambassador in the 15 member Security Council; no women in International Law Commission, the body charged with development of international law; one women judge out of 13 serving in the International Court Justice, only two women in 16 members Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions,

the key organ on financial issue; and four women representatives on the 53 member Commission on Human Rights, now known as the Human Rights Council.(Reanda 1999:58).

By way of resolution 43/224 of 21 December 1988, the General Assembly endorsed the Secretary-General's decision to deploy, on a full-time basis a Focal Point for Women at the Principal Officer level. The Focal Point, which since 1 January 2011 is part of UN Women, is mandated to monitor and report on the status of women in the United Nation's System, and assist the Secretary-General in achieving the General Assembly mandated goal of 50:50 gender balance at all levels in the UN System (UN Women 2011 f).

Although there were various resolutions, conventions, policies and programmes on women since its creation and due to the impact of international women movements in 1990s and the world conferences gender integration became a focal point in all areas of UN but still it has to achieve a lot in this regard. The gender balance principle has not done justice so far as women are concerned. Still there is hegemonic masculinity culture prevailing within the UN, as Reanda (1999) argued if the gender perspective has by now become part of the accepted paradigms in the development and human rights spheres of the UN, this is not yet quiet the case with peace and security arena, the hard core of international politics.

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