

# Promoting the Status of Women in the UN System: Experiences from an Inside Journey

## Abstract

During nearly 30 years the author worked for the advancement of women in the UN system. Focusing on women and development, the article describes her experiences as the leader of the Norwegian National Commission for UNESCO, a delegate to the UNESCO General Conferences and the focal point for women in the Paris secretariat. Subsequently, she held leading positions in Norwegian development cooperation, providing financial support and participating in the governing bodies of a number of UN organisations. She also went into the field and worked for UNICEF in West and Central Africa. The article analyses the efforts to make UN institutions change in a woman-friendly way: which strategies were used, support and resistance, progress and setbacks. Lessons learned regarding strategies to strengthen the position of women are given. The task is more complex than is often realised, and the processes of change require sustained, long-term action by numerous actors, among which the women's movement, governments of member states and the top-level leaders of the UN organisations play key roles. Progress depends on the commitment of both women and men, special knowledge and competence as well as resources.

*Keywords:* development cooperation, gender equality, gender focal points, institutional change, international women's conferences, mainstreaming, multilateral institutions, Norwegian government, UNESCO, UNICEF, United Nations, West and Central Africa, women in development, women's organisations

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## 1. Introduction

Within the framework of the United Nations Intellectual History Project the Indian development economist and activist Devaki Jain has provided an excellent study on 'Women, Development and the UN – A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice' (2005). Focusing particularly on development, the book provides an overview of the evolution of ideas and approaches – how women enriched the work of the UN and how the UN influenced the situation of women and women's organising worldwide. Jain presents the history from the perspective of the South and also from the outside. The inner

workings of the UN system are described only in part and with emphasis more on results than processes.

The UN system has regularly reviewed and appraised progress achieved and obstacles encountered in attaining the objectives related to women, focusing on activities, programmes and policies, institutional arrangements and female staff. Providing a summary description of the system as a whole, the texts are extremely condensed and do not delve into the work of each organisation. The inside stories vary from one organisation to the other and include actions at different levels: governing bodies, headquarters and the field. Many organisations have at certain points considered and discussed their efforts to promote the status of women, but there are few syntheses presenting overall pictures and independent evaluations analysing processes and results and providing insights and learning of a general character.<sup>1</sup>

Having worked during nearly 30 years to promote the status of women in the UN system – in the governing bodies and secretariat of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO; in the Norwegian government and the governing bodies of numerous development organisations; and in one of the regional offices of the UN Children’s Fund, UNICEF – I have been requested to share some of my experiences. I will focus on the work related to women and development in the different settings and describe specific as well as more general efforts and obstacles, support and opposition. How did we try to change the work of the institutions in a more women-friendly direction? What succeeded and what failed? This may contribute to a better understanding of progress and setbacks with regard to gender equality and of the processes in the UN system and similar bureaucracies responding to the demand for institutional change.

## 2. Time for Resolute Action

The World Conference of the International Women’s Year – Equality, Development and Peace – held in Mexico in 1975, represented a breakthrough for the promotion of equality of women. The governments of the world recognised that women of the entire world, whatever differences existed between them, shared the painful

<sup>1</sup> Independent evaluations include Lexow and McNeill, 1989, studying the use of a special women’s grant in UNIDO and the World Bank; Lotherington *et al.*, 1991, analysing FAO and ILO; and Geisler *et al.*, 1999, analysing FAO, UNDP and the World Bank. In 2006 UNDP’s evaluation office studied gender mainstreaming in UNDP.

experience of unequal treatment, and it was agreed to eliminate all obstacles that stood in the way of equal status between women and men. Areas for action included education and employment, health and population, housing and the family, political participation, data collection and the mass media.

The conference proclaimed 1976–85 the United Nations Decade for Women and adopted a World Plan of Action. A number of measures at national, regional and global level were recommended to achieve the objectives of the International Women's Year. Governments should include women fully in the political decisions at national and international level and ensure equal representation of women and men in delegations to international bodies, conferences and committees. All the UN organisations should adopt measures to implement the plan of action. Equality between women and men should be promoted by means of integrated programmes for the benefit of all members of society as well as special measures on behalf of women (UN, 1975).

The second wave of feminism was a main driving force behind the Mexico conference. It started in the Western countries in the 1960s and entailed considerable change. In the 1950s and 1960s Norway was a very male-dominated society with few women in public office. In the 1970s combating the discrimination of women acquired new importance and the number of women in political office increased. Still in 1975 only 16 per cent of Members of Parliament and 13 per cent of the cabinet were women. However, the Labour government made efforts to follow up the World Plan of Action. When the Norwegian National Commission for UNESCO was to be renewed in 1977, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Knut Frydenlund and his Deputy Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg changed the whole composition. A majority of women were appointed as members to replace the traditional male majority. I was appointed as the chair of the commission with two male deputies: professor Gotfred Kvifte and editor Jostein Nyhamar. But Kvifte soon withdrew and was replaced by a woman: first Sissel Volan, head of department in the Norwegian UN Association, then Ingrid Yrvin, a specialist teacher. The board was an enthusiastic and active group of extremely well-qualified people and we could organise our work the way we wanted. As an organisation of intellectual cooperation UNESCO covers a broad range of issues in the areas of education, communication, culture, and natural and social sciences. We decided to give a priority to the equality of women and men.

Promoting the human rights and fundamental freedoms of both

women and men was enshrined in UNESCO's constitution and at the time of Director-General René Maheu (France) the organisation launched a 10-year programme to advance the status of women. The programme was adopted in 1967 and called for every sector of UNESCO to be involved. A considerable array of activities was undertaken. The intentions were, however, only partially carried out. The number of women's projects was gradually reduced and there was a falling away from the original concept of a comprehensive and integrated programme involving all UNESCO sectors, to efforts mainly in the area of education. The financial commitments were also much less than foreseen. Many people perceive the UN agencies as mammoths with ample resources, but in fact they are quite small. In the 1960s and 1970s UNESCO had a budget about the size of the school budget of a city like Oslo. For the women's programmes the world organisation was to allocate US\$10 million over a period of 10 years (3 million from the regular budget and 7 million from extra-budgetary sources).<sup>2</sup> But in fact, less than half was actually spent: US\$2 million from the regular budget and US\$2.5 from extra-budgetary sources. Thus the portion for women's programmes of the total budget declined from 0.9 per cent in 1967–68 to 0.4 per cent in 1975–76 (Scherer, 1975: 9).

Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow (Senegal) was elected Director-General in 1974 and efforts were made to turn the tide with the increased focus on women during the International Women's Year. The Medium-Term Plan (1977–82) included programmes to improve the status of women and promote the participation of women in economic, social and cultural development. But the estimated growth in budget resources was only 14 per cent (UNESCO, 1977: 18–23, 208–10). Something evidently needed to be done to increase UNESCO's contribution to gender equality.

### 3. Taking Women Seriously

To increase the focus on women in the work of the organisation instructions had to come from the governing bodies – that is, the member states. Giving priority to gender issues was no simple matter, however. UNESCO's agenda was packed with important and urgent questions. Fortunately, the National Commissions in other

2 The regular budget is financed by assessed contributions from member states. The extra-budgetary resources are voluntary contributions from member states and others.

Nordic countries included female members who were interested in the advancement of women. So we created a Norwegian and a Nordic women's group to prepare interventions and proposals, collaborating closely with the Nordic members of the UNESCO Executive Board, Gunnar Garbo from Norway and Hanne Søndergaard from Denmark. At the UNESCO General Conferences in 1978 and 1980 the Nordic group presented overarching draft resolutions on the status of women (UNESCO, 1979a: 136–7; 1980b: 113–4). We demanded increased efforts according to a 'dual' – actually a three-pronged – strategy. A 'female dimension' should be included in all UNESCO programmes, special programmes should benefit women and there should be equal representation of women and men in training courses, meetings and seminars, among experts and staff. In addition to the general resolution, we proposed increased budget allocations in areas such as literacy and education, women's participation in political processes, women's culture and women's organisations.

Though the UN General Assembly endorsed the recommendations of the Mexico Women's Conference with an overwhelming majority,<sup>3</sup> UNESCO did not immediately set to work to follow them up. The secretariat was a solidly male bastion and governments included very few female ministers. Voting for a text at UN meetings was one thing; implementing the recommendations was something completely different, which did not automatically follow. Somebody had to take an initiative, elaborate proposals and lobby to get them through. When the Nordics did, we found good allies from many regions at the General Conferences. Though delegations were predominantly male, there were women delegates who were involved in gender issues, and they obtained support from their countrymen. Some men were positive. Others had reservations, but considered the issues as relatively innocuous. And it would be embarrassing to openly oppose them. In addition, the Nordic countries had a good reputation among developing as well as developed countries and added expenditures would mainly be paid by countries that could afford it. So, all the resolutions were carried. Sometimes additional resolutions relating to specific themes were also adopted.

In the 1980s the efforts related to women were characterised by a more dynamic approach. An intersectoral committee was set up within the secretariat and an ad-hoc advisory committee of external experts convened. The funds allocated for women's activities on

3 107 countries voted for, one (Israel) against and 26 abstained. The disagreement did not concern the plan of action, but references to Zionism in the declaration and resolutions from the conference (MFA, 1975–1976).

the regular budget increased from US\$0.6 million in 1977–78 to 1.7 million in 1979–80 and 3.8 in 1980–83. During the five-year period, the portion of the budget targeting women remained stable, however, at about 1 per cent, as the budget as a whole also increased substantially (UNESCO, 1979b; 1980a; 1981; 1983a).

In UNESCO's first Medium Term Plan (1977–82) only two of the 44 objectives related to women. The Second Medium Term Plan (1984–89) had to be better. But the draft from the secretariat was not. The plan consisted of 13 major programmes, including one on racism, but none on sexism. There was only a brief 'note on the lines of emphasis of the plan in the field of the status of women'. What is more, there were only two programmes (out of 54) relating to women, in the areas of education and human rights. It was stated that the female dimension would be integrated into the whole range of programmes and activities, but it was not at all clear how this in fact would happen (UNESCO, 1982: 225–31).

We made a lot of fuss. In addition to the Nordic countries, we mobilised 12 co-sponsors from different regions and proposed a transversal Major Programme XIV on The Status of Women, six additional subprogrammes concerning women, among others in the areas of culture, communication and science, and a number of actions to ensure the integration of women and women's perspectives in the other activities. Major Programme XIV was different from the other major programmes. It did not have budget allocations of its own. Besides an analysis of problems and a strategy of action, it recapitulated the programmes and activities devoted specifically to women in the other major programmes, providing an overall picture of the efforts.

Nevertheless, resistance from the secretariat was tough. The arguments were that a Major Programme XIV did not make sense and broke with the principles of the plan. But the proposals were adopted with slight modifications. Strengthening the status of women was given increased importance, more of UNESCO's activities would benefit women and the visibility and accountability of the organisation's actions were improved (UNESCO, 1983b: 277–87). We felt it was a milestone.

#### **4. A Tough Challenge**

Improving the status of women was no easy matter. It meant that established social patterns of labour and prestige, power and resources had to change. Many people resisted and men in particular

felt that their status and privileges were threatened. To facilitate change in hierarchical bureaucratic institutions like the UN, different measures were required. In addition to policy decisions in the governing bodies, more women staff had to be recruited, particularly in high-level posts, and the secretariat as a whole had to become more women-friendly. To assist in this process the strategy was devised to establish focal points for women in the institutions. A focal point was an organisational unit designed as a contact point for external and internal communications concerning the advancement of women. As the issue was of a cross-cutting nature, the focal points usually played a coordinating role. They were also expected to possess knowledge related to women's questions and contribute to a strengthening of the efforts of the organisation. A focal point could consist of an individual staff member, a unit, a division or a department.

The concept appeared to be simple. But realities were not. What should the mandate of the focal points actually be? Who was responsible for improving the status of women – the head of the organisation or the focal point? What authority should the focal points have and what means should be at their disposal? In practice, job descriptions varied considerably across the system. Due to ambivalence in the leadership of the organisations the focal points often ended up in ambiguous and contradictory situations and their effectiveness was hampered. All were women who were supposed to have an impact on a male-dominated structure. They were given wide-ranging responsibilities and tasks, but in many cases their status was low and they had few resources. However marginalised, they bore the brunt when progress was long in coming.

The Nordics believed that UNESCO needed a focal point to sensitise staff and partners to the situation of women and help find ways to improve their status. The Director-General accepted the idea in 1978 and attempts were made to recruit a qualified person, but they did not succeed. The person had to have knowledge of women's issues, be familiar with the UN system, understand the five areas of work of the organisation and be fluent in both English and French. In 1983, I was asked to take on the job. I had not applied for the post, happily doing research on women in politics, teaching and organising campaigns to strengthen the position of women in Norway. But it was difficult to refuse a request from UNESCO. The mandate and worldwide coverage were fascinating and the organisation needed to improve its performance with regard to gender equality. The Nordic countries had been pushing

for increased action for years – should we refuse to give a helping hand when requested?

I knew the job as focal point would be tough. It turned out to be even tougher than I expected. I was the first person in this kind of post in the organisation. I demanded and was given high status as a Director (D1)<sup>4</sup> and placed in a central unit, the Bureau for Studies and Programming (BEP) close to the Director-General (DG). This ensured my access to the top management of UNESCO with the exception of the DG. In spite of several requests I never got to discuss my work personally with him. I was provided with a French secretary, Nicole Rat, who helped me with everything from language to organisational procedures. But I had no budget, and the professional assistant who was supposed to help me lacked the necessary competence. Famah Joka Bangura was a former ambassador from Sierra Leone with excellent diplomatic skills, but she had never dealt with women's issues, did not speak French and had little experience in producing texts. In the embassy others did this for her. After a great deal of effort I managed to recruit Alya Saada, a very well qualified colleague from the social science sector, but the struggle took two years. And I was accused of 'racism' when I preferred a Tunisian woman to a black African. In the meantime a young Australian student, Rosi Braidotti, doing women's studies in Paris assisted me with everything from typing to programmatic issues.<sup>5</sup>

Recruitment of the focal point was done by the head of BEP, Jean Knapp. He was a top-notch French intellectual, charming, professional and committed. He supported me whenever he could, but was completely overworked. After a while he became Deputy Director-General, and a Director took over the leadership of the Bureau. L. Vu Cong was a development expert from Vietnam, but he had little understanding of women's issues and provided more resistance than support.

Formally my title was 'Coordinator', but I was supposed to strengthen UNESCO's work related to women. It was the mouse trying to change the elephant. The UNESCO secretariat, with 2000–2500 staff members, was a large, Byzantine bureaucracy. The

4 The level was accepted due to the fact that I was a former Member of Parliament and President of the Norwegian Upper House ('Lagting'). Unfortunately such qualifications were rare among women candidates for posts as focal points, resulting in problems with regard to the level of the positions.

5 She later became professor in Women's Studies at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands.



Director-General had great authority and M'Bow was a forceful leader. He was the first African head of the organisation and fought to promote the interests of the Third World. He was not against gender equality, but he was not particularly committed either, and his support was occasional and ambiguous. The deep geopolitical and cultural controversies dividing the secretariat and the budget reductions imposed by the withdrawal of the United States did not make things easier. Vehement battles regarding turfs and policies were the order of the day, including among staff dealing with women's programmes.

Even working day and night, there was no way a tiny unit like mine could manage all that was required. As I had practically no resources, I had to rely upon help from others. Fortunately several BEP colleagues were ready to assist. They were experts in the different areas of competence of UNESCO and worked with the sectors on programmatic issues. We formed a nice gender balanced and geographically varied team with Jérôme Bindé (social sciences), Jacques Hallak (education) and Françoise Rivière (culture) from France, Gloria Lopez Morales (communication) from Mexico and Albert Sasson (natural sciences) from Morocco. They took my messages around and tried to bring women's perspectives into various activities. UNESCO had more women staff than most UN agencies, about one fourth of the professionals at headquarters. Some were interested in women's issues, but often they had low-level posts and could not change the programme on their own. Many male staff reacted negatively. Few stated openly that they disagreed with the 'women business'. But they did not understand what I was talking about or could not see the relevance for their work. If I made concrete proposals, they felt that I was imposing upon them. If I didn't, they did not know what to do. Trying to persuade them, I was told that I was too 'aggressive'. But if I maintained a low profile, they shrugged me off. Some men responded in a positive way, however. And though they were not numerous, we managed to find enthusiastic collaborative partners in all sectors. They were both men and women and had different cultural backgrounds. I came to the conclusion that personality and position were more important than nationality.

I tried to mobilise the intersectoral committee on the status of women. Totally 6–10 staff members were dealing with specific women's programmes. Some saw the arrival of a focal point as an opportunity to expand their activities, while others perceived me more as a threat to their position and tried to undermine my efforts

as much as they could. There were also differing views. What was most important: to combat sexual violence or promote development for women? As long as Knapp chaired the committee, it worked relatively well and we added (male) staff members who could assist in integrating a female dimension in different activities. But when the Deputy Director-General left the leadership to others, tensions rose and involvement lessened.

Starting from the top, I went all around UNESCO to arouse interest and stimulate action. The heads of the different units were friendly, but generally non-committal, leaving it to me to talk with their staff. There was only one woman in the top management. That was more than most UN agencies at the time and she had a special background. Zala Lusibu N’Kanza became minister of social affairs in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1966, before Congolese women had the right to vote. She was only 26 years old, but had a university degree in social sciences. After five years as a minister she left the country and took a PhD at Harvard University. She was interested in women’s issues, but heading the UNESCO social science sector only on a temporary basis in the 1980s, her ability to act was limited and all the more so as the sector was marked by intense in-fighting.

Most of the UN agencies had focal points for women and interagency meetings were organised within the system. I got to know colleagues in other organisations and received valuable support. Every other month I went to Rome and shared experiences with the focal point in the Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO, Ruth Finney Hayward from Hawaii. FAO had a whole department dealing with women in agriculture and Ruth was the head of it. She was an expert in anthropology, understood the ins and outs of Byzantine bureaucracies and was an exceptionally wise, experienced and generous woman. But the formal interagency meetings were no pleasure. The competition between different organisations made collaboration very difficult. And the Advancement of Women Branch in the UN Secretariat (in Vienna at the time) requested the focal points to produce reports for which there were no resources, and develop system-wide plans that went beyond the plans adopted by the governing bodies in the different organisations.

## 5. Promoting Change

The mandate from the General Conference in Major Programme XIV was strong and I got considerable support from the Executive

Board. There were vocal allies among both male and female Board members, from the North as well as the South. Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, who became the first woman prime minister in Portugal, the Tunisian-French feminist Gisèle Halimi and the Pakistani minister Attiya Inayatullah gave feminist speeches that were noted throughout the organisation. But motives and approaches varied. I got into conflict with two of the most active women. Attiya Inayatullah together with Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil from the Philippines wanted to have a special impact on the Board. They requested that I should do a study for them (which was not my job) and go against Major Programme XIV. When I refused, I was accused in the Board meeting of lack of cooperation. It was embarrassing, but the women's proposals were later rejected by the Board.

Apart from those working with special women's programmes, there was widespread ignorance and confusion in the secretariat regarding women's issues. Even with good will, many staff members did not know how they could effectively follow up. Without material or institutional incentives how could I motivate them to take interest in something as unfamiliar and apparently insignificant as women's perspectives? My approach was to provide information, new insights and ideas relating to the situation of women and men. I tried to appeal to people's intellectual curiosity, their compassion and sense of justice and their wish to improve the quality of their programmes. I used every possible occasion and means: staff encounters and programming processes, international meetings, studies and reports.

A number of international women's organisations had consultative status with UNESCO. They spanned the girl scouts to the Soroptimists and the International Alliance of Women. We had regular meetings to discuss women's issues. The NGOs could not afford to send representatives to Paris from their international headquarters, so practically all the members of the group were elderly French ladies. Some had been stalwarts for generations in the struggle for women's rights, but their knowledge about other countries was limited. There was only one foreigner, Marie-Thérèse Avemeka, a young student who later became Minister for Women's Affairs in Congo-Brazzaville. The organisations had global networks, but very few resources for collaborative projects. So their support was mainly on a general intellectual level.

UNESCO is a unique meeting place of minds and cultures. Experts and NGOs from all over the world came to participate in the numerous seminars and conferences held at headquarters in

Paris. Once in a while notable women would be invited to speak, such as the minister from Burkina Faso, Joséphine Ouédraogo, and the Jamaican historian Lucille Meir. But they were few and far between. In connection with the Nairobi Women's Conference in 1985, Knapp managed to get funds for a meeting of an international advisory committee of experts on the status of women in the areas of competence of UNESCO. A fascinating group of women from different parts of the world shared experiences during three days, opening up new perspectives and demanding innovative efforts for the advancement of women. UNESCO staff members were invited to sit in at the meetings and the report was widely circulated in the secretariat and member state delegations.

I did not have programmes of my own, but gave technical advice and supported fundraising for the women's programmes in different sectors. As good luck would have it, I came from a supportive donor country and managed to obtain extra-budgetary funds. Most notable were the production of a series of studies of sex stereotypes in schoolbooks, of the presentation and participation of women in the media and of the role of women in science and technology. To improve accountability, the statistics regarding female staff had to be revised and I proposed that the participants in seminars and training courses should be registered by sex. There was considerable resistance to such an 'oversimplified' measure as head-counting, both in the evaluation unit and technical departments. But Albert Sasson from BEP became head of the evaluation unit and accepted the idea. When he put it into practice, people were shocked by the results and immediately started discussing how to improve their performance. Unfortunately, the registration was discontinued when Albert was transferred to another unit.

The preparations for the Nairobi conference were exciting, but also laborious and painstaking. It was clear that the objectives of the UN Decade for Women were only partially fulfilled. There was more knowledge about women, laws had become more women-friendly and mechanisms had been established to promote gender equality. Women also participated to a greater extent in development, according to studies. But in addition to political, social and cultural obstacles the worldwide economic recession in the early 1980s had serious repercussions for the status of women, particularly in low-income and least developed countries. It was crucial for the UN system to document the problems at the same time as noting progress made in spite of the obstacles. It was an opportunity not to be missed. But resources were extremely scarce. To be able to

deliver on behalf of UNESCO two BEP colleagues and two professionals from the sectors volunteered to help me during evenings and weekends to fill out questionnaires and produce reports.

In some ways the 1985 Nairobi conference was depressing. Geopolitical controversy related in particular to the Middle East tended to dominate the negotiations. The head of the US delegation, Maureen Reagan (daughter of the President), threatened to leave the conference if the word 'Zionism' was used to describe Israeli policies in the adopted texts. At the last minute, the Kenyan President of the Conference Margaret W. Kenyatta managed together with the Secretary-General of the conference, Letitia Shahani from the Philippines, to find a compromise and the conference did not break down. But a lot of effort and attention went into controversies like this, while the challenges facing poor and vulnerable women around the world were pushed into the background.

However, the international women's movement had matured and developed since the Women's Conference in Mexico. In Nairobi hundreds of NGO representatives participated in the inter-governmental conference and the NGO Forum included 14,000 women from more than 150 countries. Both before and during the conference clear requests were put forward to governments to develop more effective strategies for the advancement of women. The women-in-development or WID approach brought increased attention to the role of women, but women were easily viewed in isolation. Targeted measures to improve their status helped the beneficiaries, but the projects were usually few in number, peripheral and of limited impact. In addition to special women's projects, emphasis was therefore placed on the integration or mainstreaming of a gender perspective into all policies and programmes. The conference adopted strategies towards the year 2000 in all areas of society as well as measures to strengthen groups of special concern. The action plan included 372 paragraphs and the 157 governments represented in Nairobi finally adopted it by consensus. It was a turning point, not only due to the scope and support of the plan, but the approach to women. They were no longer perceived only as untapped resources for development, but as agents and contributors in their own right (MFA, 1985–1986; Pietilä and Vickers, 1996; Pietilä, 2007; UN, 1985).

Back from Nairobi, the battle in the secretariat about the UNESCO programme and budget for 1986–87 was going on. It was a hard fight. Due to the departure of a major member state (the US) the budget had to be cut. I don't know how many memos

I wrote and how many meetings I attended. I tried to avoid, in an extremely difficult financial situation, that the women's programmes should be the first to go. My BEP colleagues and I went around to all the units. Then the DG had high-level meetings with each sector. As a BEP Director I had the right to participate and I took the floor, referred to UNESCO's constitution and the Nairobi recommendations and requested an acceptable follow-up on the part of the organisation. Sometimes the DG supported me, and if he did not, others did, Knapp for example, and as long as the DG did not protest, a positive signal to the secretariat was given.

In fact, the women's programmes were strengthened in the draft programme and budget, not much, but the increase was essential, visible and clear – supported by the Director-General. And in the General Conference the Nordic and other member states lined up to defend the efforts related to women. The budgetary allocation rose from US\$5.7 million or 2 per cent of the regular budget in 1984–85 to US\$6.1 million or 2.8 per cent in 1986–87. In addition, a female dimension was integrated into a great number of activities and the focal point was included in the budget with four posts and US\$41,500 for operating expenses. The number of female staff in the organisation was reduced during the biennium, but not more than male staff, so the percentage remained the same (UNESCO, 1985; 1986; 1987).<sup>6</sup>

## 6. A Pocket Full of Money

In 1986, I was appointed the first female Director-General of the Norwegian Ministry of Development Cooperation (MDC). I regretted leaving UNESCO, but I was not sure how long I could keep up the efforts without more support from the top management of the organisation. My departure left the post vacant for several years. Federico Mayor from Spain took over as Director-General in 1987 and after long consideration he appointed a Danish woman, but she did not stay long, and her successor from Venezuela did not even take up her post. In 1993, Norway seconded the Secretary General of the Norwegian National Commission for UNESCO, Ingeborg Breines, as focal point to the organisation, but her responsibility was limited to women and peace and the preparations for the Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995. In 1999, with Koïchiro Matsuura

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6 23 percent female staff in the professional category and above at Headquarters and Regional Offices 31 December 1984 and 1986 (UNESCO, 1986; 1987).

from Japan as the new Director-General, a central unit for women and gender equality was re-established. However, Major Programme XIV was dismantled and medium-term strategies, programmes and budgets no longer gave an overview of the activities related to women. In 2000, the Director of the Women and Gender Equality Unit, Breda Pavlic, noted that all major programmes included projects and activities geared to empowering women and girls, but overall, gender mainstreaming in the full sense of the term had not yet been integrated into UNESCO's work (Pavlic, 2000: 16, 57; UNESCO, 2002).

In spite of opposition from some male ministers,<sup>7</sup> the Norwegian centre-right government appointed me as Director-General of the Ministry of Development Cooperation to strengthen the position of women in the MDC. The Minister for Development Cooperation, Reidun Brusletten, was a Christian Democratic woman and a feminist and she was supported by the minister responsible for equality issues, Astrid Gjertsen, a Conservative woman and also a feminist. In the MDC an elaborate machinery was established to ensure that Norway's development efforts contributed to the advancement of women. Before the Nairobi conference, a report on Norway's development assistance was presented to Parliament with a special focus on women in development (MDC, 1984–1985). The Ministry subsequently elaborated a strategy for assistance to women (MDC, 1985a). The Secretary-General was given the responsibility for implementation of the strategy in collaboration with the Planning Department, an intersectoral WID committee and staff appointed as focal points in all units. The focal points did not have the advancement of women as their only task, but were supposed to acquire competence in the area and help the units improve their performance. Training of staff was organised on a general basis and WID plans prepared in the various units. A newsletter provided information on activities and experiences. A special women's grant was introduced in addition to the ordinary budget lines and women's research, studies and evaluations were supported. Annual reports and meetings reviewed progress and obstacles.

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7 The resistance was not only due to the fact that I was a woman. In addition, I was a radical feminist and socialist and Christian Democratic men opposed me particularly because I supported self-determined abortion. I was more acceptable to Conservative men. In any case, the Norwegian civil service is supposed to be politically neutral with staff members vowing loyalty to the present Government. This implies that the political views of staff should be disregarded in connection with employment.

Before I took office, the government changed. The Labour Party took over with a woman prime minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, and 44 per cent women in the cabinet, including the Minister for Development Cooperation, first Vesla Vetlesen and then Kirsti Kolle Grøndahl. The Labour Party had adopted a 40 per cent quota and Brundtland followed up. The ‘women’s cabinet’ caused a sensation, both globally and nationally. And it set a precedent. Later, the Norwegian cabinet never had less than 40 per cent women, though the parties in power changed. In the MDC the emphasis on gender equality was carried on (MDC, 1986–1987d). As head of the Multilateral Department I had all the support I needed to take an active approach in relation to the advancement of women in the multilateral system and a generous development budget was at my disposal. The department was not large, only 20 staff in all, but we were responsible for 40 per cent of the aid budget. Soon I got a first-rate female deputy, Jorunn Mæhlum. We differed in some ways: she was politically conservative and had her experience mainly from the bilateral aid agency NORAD and the development banks, but we complemented each other and the cooperation between us was excellent. In the department all the general staff, one third of the professionals and one third of the leaders were women. Though some – women and men – were not particularly enthusiastic about women’s issues, everybody followed up. Norwegian civil servants are generally loyal to their superiors and they knew that the evaluation of their performance was at stake. The change from UNESCO was indeed dramatic.

The Norwegian government was member of a great number of multilateral organisations, providing funds and participating in the governing bodies. The organisations were important channels for Norwegian development aid. In addition to core funding, earmarked funds were allocated for programmes and projects in developing countries under the direction of the organisations. The emphasis was on basic health and education for women and environmental and population activities of importance for them. Norway was among the largest donors to the women-specific multilateral institutions: the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, INSTRAW, and the UN Development Fund for Women, UNIFEM, and organisations with a strong focus on women, such as the UN Population Fund, UNFPA, and UNICEF. Support was also provided for international women-oriented NGOs: the International Planned Parenthood Federation, IFFP, International Women’s Tribune Centre, IWTC, Women’s World Banking, WWB,



and others. In addition, contributions earmarked for women-oriented activities were channelled to the UN secretariat and regional commissions, specialised agencies, programmes and funds, the World Bank and regional development banks.

Most of the UN organisations had to change their work and priorities in a woman-friendly direction and they needed encouragement to do so. The Multilateral Department represented Norway in relation to the different organisations and all the professionals were required to analyse the situation and propose strategies to strengthen the efforts for women. At an internal seminar the proposals were discussed with the focal point for women as special advisor, representatives of other departments in the MDC and of the Ministry for Equality. A handbook was produced to guide the staff in the department (MFA, 1990a).

To promote institutional change in the organisations, we developed a strategy with a number of modalities:

- (a) consultations with other member states, particularly the Nordics, but also other like-minded states such as Canada and the Netherlands;
- (b) interventions and proposals in governing bodies;
- (c) informal contacts with management, focal points and other staff members in the organisations;
- (d) transmission of substantive views and technical know-how related to women's issues in meetings, training courses and seminars;
- (e) allocation of 'seed money' to promote institutional change;
- (f) development of networks to support the focal points; and
- (g) presentation of women candidates for posts.

Not many governments supported actively the promotion of the status of women in the UN system. In 1987–88 only 3.5 per cent of the world's cabinet ministers were women and 10 per cent of the parliamentarians. Some countries had stronger representation, but Norway was a clear exception with more than one third women MPs and ministers (UN, 1991). To the extent that donor governments supported women-related activities, they preferred to finance projects in developing countries, not administrative costs at headquarters. Norway's systematic pressure followed up with seed money was all the more noticeable and important. The amounts were relatively modest, but played a catalytic role in institutional change in organisations of various kinds, from the World Bank and regional

development banks to UNESCO and the International Labour Organisation, ILO, the UN Industrial Development Organisation, UNIDO, and the International Maritime Organisation, IMO.

Though policy statements in the different organisations were often comprehensive, moving from rhetoric to realities was difficult and slow. Commitment on the part of the top (mainly male) leadership was often weak,<sup>8</sup> budgets were tight and resistance to change in the secretariats widespread. Many organisations had an overwhelming majority of male professional staff dealing with ‘hard’ traditionally ‘masculine’ areas of competence. Others, with more ‘feminine’ areas of competence, nevertheless had men in high positions. Most organisations appointed focal points for women, but they were generally alone, some at a low level, and had few possibilities of making a difference. Norway used its seed money in a flexible way, financing both focal points for women and activities under their auspices, such as technical assistance, studies, seminars and pilot projects. Thus organisations started to become women-oriented which otherwise would not have moved in that direction, and the women-related efforts of other organisations became more widespread and focused.

Norway’s collaboration with each organisation was regularly reviewed to find the most effective approaches. To discuss the choice and impact of various measures, informal consultations were organised with the focal points in different multilateral organisations in 1988, 1990 and 1993. The consultations were organised in such a way that they provided the UN staff with a protected space, outside of the public eye, so they could support and learn from each other (MDC, 1988e; MFA, 1990d; 1993d).

The use of the women’s grant was evaluated in 1988–89 and in 1991 FORUT studied the implementation of a WID policy in FAO and ILO (Lexow and McNeill, 1989; Lotheringen *et al.*, 1991; MFA, 1990–1991b: 144). The evaluation of the women’s grant focused on the World Bank and UNIDO. More and more the grant was being used as seed money and the evaluation concluded that this was an effective way of influencing the organisations at a moderate cost. The FORUT research project also noted that the strategy of having a

8 Apart from the women-specific units, the UN system got its first female head of agency in 1987: Nafis Sadik in UNFPA, followed by Sadako Ogata as High Commissioner for Refugees in 1990, Catherine Bertini as Executive Director of the World Food Programme in 1992, Elizabeth Dowdeswell of the UN Environment Programme in 1993 and Carol Bellamy of UNICEF in 1995.

women's grant had been successful, but that further measures were required to implement the WID policy. The operationalisation of the equality agenda set by the world conferences was no simple matter and it would take time before the goals were achieved.

In connection with UN reform a Nordic UN project was launched in 1988, studying among other matters the role of the Nordic countries in promoting efforts by the UN system for the advancement of women. The authors stated that the UN system was well ahead of most of its member states as regards decisions and commitments, but the normative progress surpassed the operative, concrete results. The main thrust in the near future therefore had to be the implementation of programmes and decisions adopted. Here the Nordic countries should strengthen their action, making it more consistent and coherent (Pietilä and Eide, 1990).

## 7. Evaporation of Women's Issues

In 1999, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) commissioned a new evaluation of the WID/gender units and the experience of gender mainstreaming in multilateral organisations, focusing this time on FAO, the UN Development Programme, UNDP, and the World Bank (Geisler *et al.*, 1999). The evaluation concluded that operationalisation of gender mainstreaming was still rather weak. It was therefore recommended that Norway should continue to exert pressure and play a catalytic role in relation to the different organisations, reinforcing verbal actions with financial support.

However, the motivation to promote of the status of women was not the same as before. According to the strategy of 1985, the progress as regards WID was supposed to be evaluated in 1988/89 and a new plan drawn up. But it took many years before Norway got a new strategy. In 1990 the context changed with the fusion of the MDC with the much larger and more prestigious Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Minister of Development Cooperation became a junior minister with the Minister of Foreign Affairs being responsible for the ministry as a whole. The MFA was traditionally a solidly male bastion and continued to be so, with only men as Foreign Ministers and Secretaries-General. I was, as the first woman, promoted as Assistant Secretary-General with a male Minister for Development Cooperation, Tom Vraalsen, from the Centre Party to begin with (Agrarian) and then female ministers Grete Faremo and Kari Nordheim-Larsen from the Labour Party. Irrespective of party affiliation and gender, the political will of the ministers to

promote the status of women was notably weaker during the 1990s than before, and the resistance in the bureaucracy remained strong. The women's movement had become less vocal. As there were a considerable number of women politicians, many people felt that Norway had done what was necessary to promote gender equality. And women reaching the top had a tendency to downplay the importance of discrimination, referring to the fact that they themselves had 'made it' without too much difficulty. But equality had not in fact been achieved. Outside of the political sphere there were very few women in the elites. Women generally had lower status and less income than men and male opposition to women's progress was clearly felt. In the MFA most of the institutional mechanisms promoting WID were dismantled.

At the same time, the terms 'gender' and 'gender mainstreaming' were replacing 'women' and 'WID' internationally in development research and cooperation. The intention was to strengthen the impact of policies and interventions, learning from the perceived weaknesses of the WID strategy, where women's concerns were often sidelined and only small components added on to projects and activities. The Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 was one of the largest global conferences ever held, with some 17,000 participants from 189 countries, while 30,000 attended the NGO Forum. But in spite of progress, women's concerns were still given second place almost everywhere. The representation of women in government remained low, with 9 per cent female parliamentarians and ministers worldwide in 1995 (UN, 2000; UNDP, 1996). Discrimination was widespread and a majority of the world's poor were women. To obtain fundamental change the conference adopted a broad set of actions for the empowerment of women and the mainstreaming of a gender perspective was emphasised with regard to all policies and programmes (UN, 2001). Mainstreaming was a good strategy in principle, but in practice – employed instead of, rather than along with, targeted programmes for women – the efforts to strengthen the status of women were weakened in many cases. It was unclear how mainstreaming should come about, and special measures for women – focal points and units, allocations and activities both in international organisations and donor agencies – were discontinued or made gender-neutral, while nobody had a clue about the actual benefits for women of programmes and projects. The women's movement observed that women were being lost in the 'male-stream'.

In 1997, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs finally adopted a new strategy for women and gender equality in develop-

ment cooperation. The main message was that women and gender equality should be integrated in all development cooperation efforts. Priority was given to rights, health and education, economic participation, participation in decision-making processes and management of natural resources and the environment. But unlike the strategy of 1985 there was no action plan, the references to operational requirements were few and there were no administrative measures. In spite of strong commitment in policy statements, the institutional resources for the promotion of gender equality remained extremely limited. No special mechanisms were created and the training of staff was minimal (MFA, 1997f).

In 2002, the special women's grant was abolished. A single gender advisor was given the task of following up the strategy. As there were no proper accountability systems, not much is known about the actual implementation. Substantial efforts were continued within the framework of multilateral development cooperation, as UN organisations evidently needed further support,<sup>9</sup> but there is no overview or analysis of what actually was done. An evaluation of bilateral cooperation in 2005 concluded that the institutional resources for implementation of the strategy in the Norwegian aid administration were inadequate and the goal of mainstreaming far from being reached (Aasen, 2005). As a consequence the new centre-left government reintroduced a women's grant in 2007 and an action plan was elaborated for women's rights and gender equality in development cooperation 2007–2009 (MFA, 2007h; 2007–2008i).

## 8. Field Posting

I took leave from the MFA in 1994–99. The Executive Director of UNICEF, Jim Grant, asked me to become Regional Director in West and Central Africa. Grant was an extraordinary leader, extremely capable, committed and innovative, with a special grasp on practical problem-solving. And he was serious about gender equality. To increase the number of women staff in the organisation during a two-year period he only recruited male staff if there were special reasons to do so. Otherwise he recruited women. As one of the first UN organisations, UNICEF reached 40 per cent women staff in the professional category and above. One of Grant's three depu-

9 This was confirmed among others by a consultation with gender focal points in a number of organisations in 2002 (MFA, 2002c).

ties was a woman, Karin Sham Poo from Norway, and among the regional directors we were 50/50 women and men. Just how special Grant was, was demonstrated by his successor. Carol Bellamy was also American (like all UNICEF Executive Directors) and was a passionate advocate of education for girls. But she held the view that gender was irrelevant for people's professional careers in an organisation like UNICEF. Soon the number of women in high-level posts plummeted and she had to make extraordinary appointments to prevent an increasing imbalance.

Many thought the advancement of women was straightforward in UNICEF, because women and children were the main target groups of the organisation. But women as such were not part of UNICEF's mandate to begin with, and over the years the organisation moved very slowly from children, to children and mothers, to children and women in all their roles. During the Women's Decade, there was greater focus on women and, like other UN organisations, UNICEF elaborated policies and strategies for women in development. Studies proliferated and staff was trained (UNICEF, 1985; 1987a, b). In West and Central Africa, however, the staff had not reflected much on gender aspects of their work.

As Regional Director I was part of UNICEF's global leadership. I was stationed in Abidjan in the Ivory Coast, but went regularly to New York for meetings and consultations. I also travelled extensively in the region, talking with Heads of State, governments, UNICEF staff and NGOs, visiting projects and activities. The role of the regional office was to assure the quality of UNICEF programmes and operations. Every country had a UNICEF office, but they were often small and the regional office provided technical backup and guidance. Twenty regional experts in the areas of health, education, child protection, country analysis and operations advised country offices and organised seminars and training for UNICEF as well as national staff. In addition to the experts there were 30 general service staff. In total, 17 nationalities were represented in the regional office and, though cultural tensions were felt, collaboration was surprisingly smooth and collegial. UNICEF recruited exceptional staff with regards to competence, commitment and idealism combined with a pragmatic approach. It was an impressive and enjoyable team. My three division chiefs were all men: my deputy and programme officer Martin Mogwanja from Kenya and the operations officer Roberto Jiron from Chile were very supportive of my leadership. The communications officer, Moncef Bouhafa from Tunisia, had difficulties, however, and left the office after a while.

In total, around 40 per cent of the general and of the professional staff were women, and both women and general staff felt that they were discriminated against in a rigid hierarchical male-dominated bureaucracy.<sup>10</sup> Introducing more egalitarian and democratic values and arrangements for the office as a whole changed the atmosphere and contributed to more active involvement in the advancement of women.

It was the first time the regional office had a female director and the first time the director was interested in women's issues. My predecessor appointed a focal point for women. Elsie Effange-Mbella was a diplomat from Cameroon with broad international experience. Though she had spent most of her life in the region, she had never worked specifically with women's issues and was not interested in them, either. So there had not been much discussion and training. Finding a capable African focal point was no easy task: few had relevant training and adequate language skills. Until I managed to terminate Elsie's contract and recruit a more qualified person in the area of women's studies (Kate Lifanda also from Cameroon), I provided basic gender training myself, brought in the focal point from UNICEF headquarters (an African from Ethiopia, Misrak Elias) for seminars in the regional office and for the country representatives and collaborated more closely with women's organisations in the region.

The 'gender thing' had to be perceived as an important part of African realities. Some of the male professionals said: 'It's a Western problem, it's not like that here'. Others were confused: 'Is gender about women or is it not about women?' As I was Western, it was crucial to get Africans to describe the situation in the region. I explained about discrimination of women in general and presented statistics showing the differences between women and men with regard to education, health, labour, decision-making and income in African countries. There were few studies from the region, so African colleagues – both women and men – were requested to share their personal and professional experiences. To begin with, they were shy and reserved. Western 'experts' had done a good job of making Africans feel they were inferior. I had to use all my authority as Regional Director, insisting on the significance of their contributions, before they ventured to speak honestly and directly. And we, the foreigners, got insights we had not foreseen. The conclusion

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10 My predecessor, Stanislas Spiro Adotevi, was an eminent philosopher and cultural personality from Benin and his management style was marked by French-African bureaucratic structures and practices.

was clear: we had to learn more. Again intellectual curiosity and professional ambition were helpful qualities, though some felt they knew enough. The professionals took upon themselves to look for relevant information and talk with local partners to find out more about how gender differences hindered the well-being of women and children in the region and the efforts to improve their situation. The status of girls, as well as women, became a central concern.

West and Central Africa was a region with widespread poverty, high child and maternal mortality and low levels of education. African girls had special problems. From a young age they had to help their mothers. Often, the workload was very heavy, much heavier than that of boys, and the girls got less education. About half of the girls were married before the age of 18 and the continent had the highest rate of teenage pregnancies. The young girls were often physically immature, overworked and undernourished and complications in connection with pregnancy and delivery were the most important causes of death.

The hardships of African girl children were 'invisible' for a long time in the public debate. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that everyone is entitled to all rights and freedoms without distinction of sex, but the text itself is completely gender-neutral. There is no reference to the special problems girls face in many settings. It was a challenge to bring the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) into discussions, both internally in UNICEF and with partner governments, draw attention to the situation of girl children and gain support for measures to improve their situation. During the African preparations for the Beijing Women's Conference, UNICEF collaborated with African women ministers and women's organisations and a special chapter on the girl child was included in the Platform for Action. African women also met with approval when they demanded sexual rights, so women and girls could protect themselves against HIV/AIDS (UNICEF, 1995).

But afterwards, implementation was weak and scattered, despite the efforts of the women's movement. In many cases, governments and donors refused to provide support. Some activities were controversial, such as promoting reproductive rights and combating HIV/AIDS, harmful traditional practices or the trafficking of girls, though a few countries implemented programmes. In other cases, girls were considered less important than boys. When efforts were made to help child soldiers, little attention was paid to 'wartime women' (girl soldiers), for example. Generally, there was an acute



lack of funds. Practically all the governments in the region were poor and few Western donors had extensive collaboration with West and Central Africa (most gave priority to East and Southern Africa).

It was possible to obtain funding for basic education for girls. The Jomtien Conference organised by the World Bank, UNDP, UNESCO and UNICEF in Thailand in 1990 called for education for all. UNICEF placed special emphasis on girls, and both governments and donors, Norway among others, were willing to follow up. After years of neglect, due among other reasons to the economic crisis, the school system was in decay. So extensive educational reforms were implemented. A range of innovative experiments was carried out within the existing primary school and supplementary to it. Non-formal schools of various kinds were established. As education services improved, more children were enrolled. How to get girls to school was an open question, however. There was not much systematic experience. UNICEF entered into discussions with ministers of education, other UN agencies and NGOs. Women's organisations mobilised and the authorities introduced special measures such as information campaigns, collaboration with traditional and religious leaders, flexible school schedules, scholarships and incentives. The challenges turned out to be more complex than we thought. The number of girls in primary school increased. But so did the number of boys. So the gender gap remained. More comprehensive efforts were required to achieve equality. By 2006, the gap had been reduced on average by a few percentage points (UN, 2008b).

After education, health was the most important area for UNICEF. Primary health care services were often in a sad state of affairs and the organisation helped governments establish and revitalise health centres, supply mother-and-child care and immunise children. Women and children benefited to a great extent from the reformed centres. But it was not easy to get support for a long-term building-up of health systems. Donors generally preferred short-term, more visible health campaigns. During immunisation campaigns many children were reached, but it was impossible to know if girls and boys were reached to the same extent. The statistics were not disaggregated by sex. Attempts to get immunisation coverage figures for both girls and boys were in vain. Official UN statistics was a complex inter-agency affair and many governments had problems collecting and updating reliable data. Great efforts were being made to improve educational statistics and we were advised not to increase the burden on weak administrations by also requiring more complex health data.

Community-based primary healthcare was the order of the day. The ‘Bamako Initiative’ was launched by UNICEF and the African health ministers as model for a renaissance of health services in a difficult economic environment. The idea was to improve the operations of the primary healthcare centres by the authorities providing essential drugs and the population purchasing them at low cost. Health committees elected by the communities supervised the centres. The model had good effects, but the health committees consisted of men only, though the clients to a great extent were women and children. When I raised the issue, nobody had thought about it. The men were chosen automatically as heads of household. Some governments were willing to try to bring women in, but it was not easy. In many places women were supposed to keep silent in male-dominated gatherings, and special women’s committees had low status. Promising results were obtained when village leaders agreed to hand over the tasks of the health committee to a women’s cooperative. This did not happen often, but when it did, management was good, contact with the population improved and more women visited the health centres.

Trying to reduce maternal mortality was the most frustrating. The region had the highest mortality in the world and for every woman who died, many suffered from serious, lifelong injuries. But the problem concerned ‘only’ women and in many places pregnancy and birth were not a theme for public discussion. Often people considered the death of a woman during childbirth practically as a natural event – something unavoidable. Health experts said most maternal deaths and disabilities could be prevented through well-targeted interventions at a low cost. But women had to have access to basic health services including family planning and pre-natal services. Satisfactory nutrition before and after birth was required and qualified assistance during delivery. Finally, there had to be access to obstetrical emergency care in the case of complications. In many places in West and Central Africa such conditions simply did not exist. In collaboration with the World Health Organization, WHO, and UNFPA, we in UNICEF tried to create interest and obtain support. But African authorities as well as donor governments thought the misery of mothers was too ‘special’ and birth-related complications too ‘complex’. Some measures were also controversial. Though reduction of maternal mortality was included among the UN Millennium Development Goals in 2000, practically no progress was noted from 1990 to 2005 (UN, 2008b).

Family planning was a delicate matter in UNICEF due to di-

vergent opinions among member states. The Vatican in particular exerted pressure to prevent the organisation from involving itself. The solution was to focus on safe motherhood. And births occurring too early, too close, too often and too late threaten the health of both women and children. Thus family planning became part of mother-child care, which UNICEF supported, but the organisation did not take a stand on different methods or purchase contraceptives. That was the task of UNFPA, to the extent that the organisation had funds. But for years the US withheld its contribution (Skard, 2003).

## 9. Lessons Learned

Many people were optimistic in 1975. Having brought women's concerns onto the international agenda and obtained the support of all member governments for the equal rights of women and men, they thought progress would be notable and swift. But they disregarded the complexity of the issues. Achieving gender equality implies a social transformation, altering deeply engrained gender roles and well-established relations of power and prestige. This entails discomfort and resistance to change. The United Nations plays an important normative role and the recommendations adopted in course of the years promoting the status of women were comprehensive, far-reaching and profound. But both UN organisations and member states found themselves in trouble when it came to translating the norms into action. The experience was widespread that agreed recommendations were not necessarily implemented and if they were, progress was modest, uneven and slow.

Sixty years after the UN Charter underlined the rights and freedoms of women and men and 30 years after the International Women's Year, progress has been made, but equality is far from being achieved in the UN system and the world at large. This is in spite of the fact that the UN Millennium Summit reconfirmed the global consensus on gender equality in 2000.<sup>11</sup> As there are no adequate accountability systems, it is impossible to get an accurate picture of the contribution of the UN in course of the years. There is considerable variation within the system. Some organisations have made more progress than others in orienting their activities towards women. But none has achieved all the goals and many are

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11 The Beijing Platform for Action was not confirmed as a whole. The emphasis was first of all on health and education and the scope was gradually broadened. Reproductive health was only included in 2005 (Skard, 2008; UN, 2008b).

far from them. A system-wide evaluation in 2006 noted that at all levels there was limited awareness and understanding of gender equality and mainstreaming (IANGWE, 2006).

At the same time, very much remains to be done to improve the situation of women and girls worldwide. Though living conditions generally have improved, large numbers of women still live in poverty, with exposed, unregulated and insecure employment and low income. Education has been extended, but girls and women receive less education than boys and men. People generally live longer, but women's health is threatened by HIV/AIDS and the lack of services. The challenges of discrimination and violence remain, and in political decision-making women are only slowly gaining ground. In 2008, 18 per cent of the world's parliamentarians and 16 per cent of ministers were women (Goetz *et al.*, 2008; UN, 2008b; UNRISD, 2005).

It is important to realise that it takes a long time to redress the extensive inequalities between women and men. At the same time, strong and regularly renewed commitment is necessary to keep moving forward. Nothing happens by itself. Governments must keep up the pressure in the governing bodies of the UN organisations, review progress and recommend further action. Though they need not be numerous, some governments must take the lead and keep the issues on the agenda. To be able to do follow-up properly, appropriate accountability systems need to be developed.

The top leadership in the organisations plays a crucial role. In an executive position it is possible to get things going. The UN organisations making progress also had executive directors or director-generals who were not only committed in theory, but made systematic efforts to walk the talk. If top leaders do not do this, it is difficult for staff down the line to actively promote change. Unfortunately, the approach to gender equality is not a criterion for the selection of UN top executives. Several – both men and women – have nevertheless made notable contributions. But more have not. Some think top women leaders are a guarantee for women-friendly reforms. This is not the case. They may lack the necessary motivation, competence and backing. Further, there are competing concerns, goal congestion, resistance to change and to addressing gender issues. Both male and female leaders need support to be able to promote gender equality in an effective way: specialist advice and resources for institutional change. It is necessary to make the top management accountable for its efforts. These should include establishment of institutional mechanisms, capacity-building, incentives and accountability at all levels of the organisation.

The involvement of men is required to promote gender equality. Ownership of the issues must include the staff as a whole. At the same time the recruitment and promotion of female staff must continue to ensure a gender balance, particularly at decision-making levels. Considerable progress has been made, especially in some organisations, with regard to female professional staff, but in leadership positions the representation is still limited, amounting to 27 per cent for the system as a whole in 2007 (UN, 2008a).<sup>12</sup> This is more than in the governments of member states, but still far from the established goals.

The main driving force for gender equality is the women's movement. The international women's conferences organised by the UN played an important role strengthening the movement. They made it possible for women to meet and strategise at the global level and gain access to decision-makers all over the world. Since the Beijing conference there have been no such conferences, though the UN Commission on the Status of Women has held extended sessions. The UN needs to consider how the system can continue to contribute to women's national and international networks so they are able to keep up the pressure. As many women are resource-poor, particularly in developing countries, it is necessary to provide financial support so that their voices can be heard and they can influence men in power. The women also represent vital sources of insight into the realities on the ground.

There are no quick fixes. It must be accepted that the advancement of women is a task that requires special knowledge and competence. Research and analyses are crucial to make gender differences visible, expose power disparities and clarify progress and obstacles. Insight into concrete realities can influence skeptics, show that targeted action is justified and improve the effectiveness of programmes and activities. The widespread confusion about basic concepts such as 'gender' and 'mainstreaming' bears witness to a lack of training and insight, in addition to the fact that the strategy has weaknesses in its conception and implementation. No evaluations since 1995 have so far described the strategy of gender mainstreaming as being successful in empowering women and promoting equality. In some cases the results even appear to be the opposite. Actual differences between women and men are concealed, including the fact that discrimination all in all is against

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12 Female staff in the professional category and above amounted to 38 per cent. Only two organisations had 50 per cent or more: UNFPA and UNITAR. Nine organisations had 40–49 per cent, 10 had 30–39 per cent and 10 below 30 per cent.

women, not men. And ‘mainstreaming’ serves as an excuse for inaction. There is a need to review and revise concepts and courses of action, based on a woman’s rights approach.

Gender focal points can play an important catalytic role, but to be effective they need status and appropriate qualifications. Not just any woman will do. And the work must be institutionalised, so that it does not depend on the enthusiasm of just a few individuals. There must be a critical mass of committed and competent gender specialists – women, but also men – kept together with access to high-level management. Then ideally there should be additional full-time specialists in other units and decentralised offices. And there should be allocation of adequate resources to have an impact. An overview in 2006 showed that the UN organisations overall had a great number of focal points, but most were assigned the job in addition to their regular duties, were junior staff, had no background in gender or women’s issues, no operational capacity and no authority in their offices. The lack of funding for the women-specific units in the system – INSTRAW, UNIFEM and the women’s entities in the UN secretariat – also speaks volumes (Donovan, 2006).<sup>13</sup> To be able to move forward, the institutional capacity relating to gender issues needs to be strengthened. The women’s movement has proposed a new UN agency for women to improve the performance of the system (CWGL and WEDO, 2006). This might have an effect, but to make real progress member states have to support more effective action and donor countries must strengthen the resource base.

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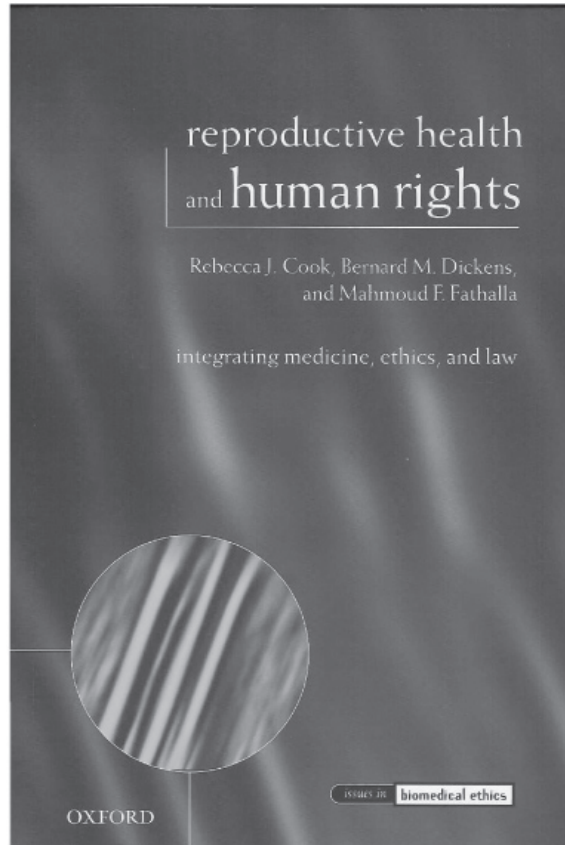
<sup>13</sup> In 2004 the units disposed totally of 101 core staff and 65 million US\$.

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