

**The role of
feminist
organizations
in the High
Level Political
Forum -HLPF**

**Routes for
advocacy**



Commission
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THE ROLE OF FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS IN THE HIGH LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM -HLPF

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CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION IN THE UN

Up until 1992, Civil Society participation in the United Nations activities was very variable, although it was possible to attend international conferences before each event, there were doubts such as: who could participate and how, under what conditions could the different organizations and groups do so. The Consultative Status organizations had more facilities to join, but the conditions were not clear nor what prior access they had to documents or how they could participate during such meetings. For this reason, women's and feminist organizations were prevented from participating in issues concerning

us directly, such as Women's conferences, held within the framework of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

International Women's Year was proclaimed in 1975 and the first Conference took place in Mexico, where a plan of action was drawn, goals were set, and the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985) was declared. It was agreed to hold a second meeting in 1980, which constituted the Second International Women's Conference, held in Copenhagen.

The World Conference on Women (Mexico, 1975) had a novelty, most country delegations were led by women, something rare until that time at the UN. **Another characteristic was that for the first time a non-governmental organizations forum took place, parallel to the official conference. This was an important precedent that has been maintained to date at all global women's conferences.**

Prior to the Second Conference (1979), the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a women's rights treaty of key significance promoting equality between women and men. Since then, the countries that ratified the Convention are obliged to adapt their standards and to submit reports every four years to the Convention's Commission of Experts, which reviews the development and makes observations and recommendations to the states, so that they can consider its application and guarantee their implementation. CEDAW has been ratified so far by 165 states, but we are still struggling to get all UN member states to do so.

During the Second World Conference on Women held in Copenhagen (1980) equality in work, health, and education were adopted. Non-achieved goals were also considered and

emphasis was made on the need for them to be met.

The Third World Conference on Women was held in Nairobi, with the participation of 157 countries and 15,000 representatives of women's and feminist organizations. The Forum of Civil Society Organizations was very rich and foreboding of Beijing's Forum in 1995.

In Nairobi, equality was raised as a prerequisite for development, no longer as a women-only issue, but as a necessary condition for achieving it globally. This was not minor, since it gave equality between women and men a key value by positing it as imperative to overcome poverty and backwardness in economic and social terms in a large number of countries belonging to the so-called "non-developed world".

Being the first conference held in Africa, it allowed the mobilization of women from the

continent, greatly impacting the Civil Society Organizations Forum. I had the opportunity to attend and it was an unforgettable experience. Those two weeks with such an important group of African women, in a difficult and hostile environment for women, simultaneously feeling the strength with which they defended their rights, left an indelible mark on me. Something incredible was, we were in the continent where AIDS had a great impact and the subject was not discussed. In retrospect, societies' capacity for denial is incredible.

The Fourth and last International Conference was held in Beijing (1995). It was rich and diverse. If at Nairobi, African women showed us their strength and capacity to fight, in Beijing, Asian women shared their hospitality and great delicacy. The Civil Society Forum was held in Huairou, close to Beijing, and thousands of women sang, spoke, and expressed themselves in their native languages. Language barriers were overcome with gestures and body expressions that allowed us to understand and

share. The mental postcard colors of those of us in Huairou is still today a strong image, rich in nuances, faces, and gestures that expressed the joy of being together, despite the misfortunes and discriminations that we all share.



From its beginning, the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Network – LACWHN - has participated in all regional and global activities of the United Nations and its agencies.

In a preparatory meeting for the International Conference on Population and Development to be held in Cairo (1994), over a hundred feminist and women's health activists from the region shaped and updated the main content of the concerns regarding women's health in our countries. Priority issues such as the link between population growth and demographics and women's rights to decide on their reproduction were addressed, seeds of the strong impact that the defense of reproductive rights had on the Conference years later in Cairo.

Along with early motherhood or teenage pregnancy, we also worked on HIV/AIDS, still incipient but already present as a health problem for women. We also addressed problems related to health during pregnancy, childbirth, and post-partum. The meeting was held in the midst of cholera.

After the meeting in Santiago de Chile (1991) the Network was a clear and shared a position about the issues to be addressed and the creation of an Advisory Council was approved. This council paved the path to structure the future entity which in 1995 was constituted as an independent organization, until then it operated as part of ISIS international, an Italian NGO. Those were years of great intellectual production and NETWORKING, of strengthening its membership and institutional presence, not only regionally but globally.

In 1992, during the International Conference on Environment and Development, known as ECO 92 (Rio de Janeiro), the Network had an important participation in the women's tent organized by Women, Environment, and Development Organizations together with Brazilian feminists. This tent was settled in the center of the Civil Society Forum.

The official sessions were held in Riocentro - Rio de Janeiro's Convention and Exhibition Center. The women's tent was located across the city, so those of us who represented civil society hardly attended these sessions, as we were concentrated in discussions focused on the link between demographics and population policies. The interventions of Elza Berquo, African descent feminist demographer who defends women's rights, especially African descent women's rights, focused on the importance of each woman being able to decide if, when, and with whom she wants to have a child as something that cannot be delegated to the states or the demographers gathered at the Conference.

Benedita da Silva was also present at the tent, denouncing compulsive sterilization policies and methods black women were subject to at the time being and practiced by the Brazilian Association

of Family Planning, based on a demographic policy aimed at decreasing birth rates, but biased towards Afro-descendants, which meant a violation of reproductive rights. These discussions were a preview of what would be debated in Cairo at the Conference on Population and Development.

In Rio we also fought against the environmentalists, who argued that birth control was the only possibility for the world and the population to survive in the face of imminent resource shortages. Norway's Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, and academician Jacques Yves Cousteau also supported this argument. In other words, they supported population policies that limited the reproductive rights of people, especially black or impoverished women.

The first agreement on climate change was created at the International Conference in Rio, precursor to the Kyoto Agreement. The Agenda 21 was also approved, with very important related actions and the major groups were constituted as a way to organize the participation of the Civil Society in the United Nations.

Initially nine groups were created, one of them being Mujeres, something we had been demanding and whose spokesperson and main defender was Bela Abzug, feminist activist, president of WEDO.

The creation of the major groups allowed and normalized the participation of civil society, ensuring access to documents and all information, making that participation more effective and organic.

This was a great civil society organizations achievement, ending the struggle of requesting authorization to open the door to the world of international decisions before each meeting. As a participation requirement, organizations should have ECOSOC Consultative Status. This was how the Network, together with feminist organizations and networks from all over the world, and other civil society groups, processed and were able to have a voice at the UN.

The Network's main participation was to prepare the International Conference on Population and Development and then the Conference itself, its

follow-up, and monitoring of its implementation. The Network was an important actor regionally and internationally, as it continues to be, 25 years after its adoption.

In Cairo, people's reproductive rights were acknowledged, opposed to the demographic goals and their policies. In other words, what started in Rio was now settled.

Another important arena for advocacy and lobbying by the Network, as part of the women's movement, was the Fourth International Women's Conference (Beijing). Sexual and reproductive rights were recognized then, an objective that was not met at Cairo and that the Network had been fighting for since the preparations for the meeting that took place in 1991.



THE 1990s AND THE UN CONFERENCES

The 1990s was a time for human rights maximum splendor at the United Nations. In each international conference rights expanded through a cascading effect. In Rio (1992), civil society was granted participation in all activities. The following year in Vienna, violence against women was recognized as a human rights violation. This was a major breakthrough, requiring the mobilization of millions of women around the world, collecting signatures, and setting up tribunals during the conferences where women confessed to and denounced all forms of violence.

The following years, progress was made in multiple scenarios: during the Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, progress in the recognition of reproductive rights; at the Conference on Social Development in Copenhagen, social, cultural, and economic rights; and Beijing, rights of women and girls. This decade culminated in the Durban Conference (2001), focused in all forms non-discrimination rights.

Since the year 2000, human rights advocacy and their recognition by the Member States of the United Nations gradually diminished. Also

there has been little interest in the participation of the civil society in these governance spaces. This is clearly seen during the Pandemic, prohibiting face-to-face activities and replacing them with virtual meetings, generating a fallacy in terms of participation, as in this new modality civil society is only an observer: this is a cause for concern and demand for organizations, especially those that defend women's rights.

Due to the fact that during the international conferences of the 1990s rights guarantee models created very ambitious action programs that never took place, in 2000 the Secretary General of the United Nations proposed some much less ambitious goals for developing countries: Millennium Development Goals: MDGs, for which he proposed a period of fifteen years.

The MDGs were defined without consulting civil society organizations, which generated a lot of discontent, especially

among women's and feminist organizations, because levels of demand were reduced to very low values: this meant that countries stopped making efforts to seek and promote interventions that would improve indicators such as maternal mortality rate.

Reality showed that these new, less ambitious goals were not to be met either, and the Millennium Development Goals would not be achieved by 2015, beginning with poverty reduction. In each biweekly evaluation, little progress was observed, so in 2012 the UN proposed to review and consider what should be done and how the world could move forward to overcome poverty and the multiple non-achieved objectives. Thus, the UN began to consider a new program that could move things forward and to give a new impetus to improve the living conditions of citizens around the world. This was a broad new construction including governments, civil society representation through major groups, and UN system agencies participation. The Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDG is the result of this work, bringing together the next 15 years main elements and aspirations in a single document.



In September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly along with most prime ministers, presidents, and highest authorities of the member countries, approved the Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. This was an important achievement for the feminist movement, since unlike the MDGs, the feminist movement, through the Major Women's Group and others, participated in their formulation and discussion for over three years.

The Agenda 2030 allowed us to return to the proposals and human rights recognition set during the 90's. The Agenda and its SDG are very ambitious, reason why it will not be easy to accomplish everything. However, it sets a very clear path of the wants and what the countries have committed to do in order to achieve these goals.

The 17 SDG are interconnected, becoming one unit and making it difficult to consider them in an isolated manner. SDG 5 on women's empowerment was the result of a great struggle by the Major Group of Women, UN Women, and some countries. In general, gender topic was set transversally in all other objectives, which

constituted a risk since there are no specific measurements to evaluate their progress and results in the path towards equality.

OSD 5 includes specific actions with goals and indicators, and is interrelated with all the other objectives, thus allowing for the articulation of women's empowerment with other variables.

The High Level Political Forum (HLPF) was created along with the Agenda, which within the ECOSOC framework, it analyzes annually the progress and development of the Agenda and its SDG.

The Forum meets annually for two weeks. During the first week, the different aspects of the Agenda are evaluated: thematic areas, indicators, and scope of its thematic axes are reviewed, as well as the condition of the main components in order to adapt and strengthen them.

During the second week, the ministerial segment meets with ministers and highest authorities responsible for implementing the Agenda and its SDG in the member countries. The Ministerial Declaration is adopted, the governments assume and renew their commitments, and also indicate future guidelines. The National Voluntary Reports (NVR), one of the most important components of the Forum, are also presented.

Governments that apply to submit voluntary reports must send them to the Secretariat in advance, and they are then they are posted on the website. Each country presents what has been done and discusses achievements and obstacles encountered while implementing the Agenda.

The development of NRVs should involve different stakeholders, especially civil society organizations and the private sector. Characteristically, in most countries the role of civil society is more symbolic than real. It is almost always called upon at the last minute when the report is advanced, in reality it is a presentation prior to the Forum's, and in many occasions there is no time to give an opinion or there is very little time for an in-depth analysis. In other cases, only a few organizations are invited to participate and, in the best of cases, they are asked to make a specific contribution to some point or aspect of the report.

The Major Women's Group and other major groups have insisted on the need for meaningful participation, that is, all interested parties or the great majority be called upon, access to the necessary information, and that their contributions be received and considered. The government may not include all contributions due to differences, but in such case this should be reported, clarifying there were disagreements with one or more civil society groups. Governments should also facilitate training for civil society groups, as some organizations staff do not have the knowledge to perform these analyses.

In some countries training is provided by the United Nations agencies. While many efforts have been made, civil society organizations participation in the NRVs has not improved and it is crucial to insist, especially with women's and feminist organizations approaching governmental agencies responsible for implementing the SDGs, in order to gather information about the NRVs and show interest in supporting the process. Similarly, the organizations should gather information on their own and must insist on being convened.

The presentation of NRVs at FPAN is unsatisfactory for the Major Groups and other actors. In general, they can be made individually or in a panel, in the latter, the four countries come together and make four presentations in a row and then questions are asked, first the other countries followed by those of the UN agencies, and finally those of the civil society. The Secretariat has organized a system: first communicating the interest in participating in the questioning, then agreeing to do so by email, and finally face to face along with other groups and organizations that will also ask questions. This process forces agreement on the questions among organizations, even with some that do not operate or work directly in the country. Having to agree among a variety of interests, generates hybrid questions that in many cases favor the countries, which feel liberated from answering key questions.

This is certainly a mistake, countries should be allowed to accept questions from civil society as part of the transparency of the process. Despite repeated claims and evidence of other drawbacks by mixing the participating organizations, this has not been transformed.

The first five years of the Agenda's monitoring cycle were completed in 2020, the first of three. This required a review of the Forum's processes and methods of development in order to adapt them and achieve greater effectiveness. The review process began last year with the creation of the Friends of the Forum Committee, led by Mexico. The Major Group of Women held meetings with some experts from civil society groups

to discuss possible modalities and even change of dependency within the UN.

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the FPAN was held virtually, so this discussion was postponed to next year. Task force meetings were closed to civil society participation through major groups and other actors.

During the General Assembly, meetings will be held and the Major Women's Group will analyze alternatives, especially in relation to the intersectoriality and interrelationship between the ODSs and not the isolated consideration of some of them, as has been done, impoverishing their analysis. The Major Women's Group and the other major groups will closely follow the General Assembly when the FPAN's topics are discussed in order to intervene and contribute. Likewise, they will carry out a social media campaign demanding the modifications that they consider necessary.



2020 HIGH LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM

2020 Forum was totally virtual due to the pandemic. Although the decision was taken close to the date, this created difficulties ensuring effective participation of both government and civil society representatives. The latter had very limited possibilities to express themselves although space was left at the end of the formal sessions for civil society participation, it was limited to only three voices of larger groups per session, so the 18 groups had to be distributed in the different sessions. On many occasions, due to lack of time they were unable to speak or some technical problems prevented the group from expressing itself. A major barrier was the lack of simultaneous

translation in the vast majority of sessions, limiting not only the participation of civil society, but also that of government representatives.

The participation of civil society was mainly through the United Nations television, limiting it to being only listeners of discussions and negotiations, not allowing real interaction. The other major limitation was virtual rooms limited capacity for the sessions, so States had to limit the number of people to maximum of two and the possibility for civil society was one per group.

Greatest participation was in the side events. Although there was no simultaneous translation, there was the possibility to be in the virtual room, interact with the presenters, and have dialogues, questions, and/or comments.

Official side events were few, as the Secretariat severely limited authorizations due to availability issues of rooms in the UN building. Although there were groups and countries that set up side meetings, increasing their number and diversity, there were still not as many as would have been possible if it had been known at the outset that they were all going to be virtual.

The 2020 Voluntary Country Reports were held as usual in the ministerial segment during the second week. Since many countries presented their reports, they began earlier, that is Friday of the first week and not on the Monday of the second week. Countries were able to choose to make video presentations, previously recorded, which did not allow questions from the countries and civil society. In addition, many

governments changed their presentation format at the last minute, which led to even greater mismatches.

With regard to civil society participation, the process was organized by a working group of the Major Groups and other stakeholders, which organized a team with collaborators by region, who in turn divided up the countries for follow-up and guidance. This model was similar to the one followed in 2019, modified by the virtual modality. Initially, a questionnaire was developed to ask organizations to report their participation in the process, and then regional groups were set up for follow-up.

The RSMLAC contributed to the Major Women's Group with a database of the organizations it works with in each country, especially in the English-speaking Caribbean. As in 2019, it was very difficult to get them to answer or to provide information despite the Network's insistence.

Nevertheless, virtual meetings were held with the organizations in each country, settling the questions and who would present them. The sessions were held in groups using simultaneous translation and in many cases, poor time management led to long presentations and/or answers to questions asked by other countries. In addition to the technical difficulties faced by participants and even the moderator, there were several cases in which civil society was unable to ask questions. The solution offered was that countries would answer by written through the Secretariat. This is a completely different

mechanism with no possibility of establishing a dialogue between the country and the organizations.

Virtuality prevented civil society from approaching State delegations in the corridors and/or at the UN bar. These informal meetings open dialogues as it is not always possible to set formal appointments. Virtual meetings eliminate this possibility and virtual interviews are really hard to schedule.

The Major Group of Women arranged several interviews with some ambassadors and/or delegates, but not as many those arranged at the face-to-face forums. This new modality forces us to rethink and reorganize new ways of doing advocacy and influencing UN events, creating uncertainty.

Rethinking and renewing advocacy modalities and forms is something that concerns all of civil society, especially groups such as LACWHN, feminist organizations in Latin America and the

Caribbean and other regions, with years of success, that suddenly can no longer use the usual modalities, and now more than ever, advocacy is necessary to stop the right-wing groups. This changes take time, training, and resources and must include funding donors in these activities. They must understand this new reality and be willing to include funding and support programs to help NGOs, networks, and feminist groups adapt to the new forms of participation. This requires a rapid transformation and adaptation of both donors and civil society.

For young people programs beginning with these activities, it is essential to incorporate the new modality and make a rapid training adaptation. It is clear that the coaches are also being trained in the new modality and there is no evaluation for the new techniques established in July 2020.

These are the main challenges and lessons of the 2020 High Level Political Forum.

The General Assembly will be almost entirely virtual, except for the representatives in the country missions in New York. Both government and civil society delegations and other actors must participate virtually. Specifically, we have some key dates in which we must try to participate and influence: FPAN session and Beijing+25. We must be prepared to participate and influence by distance and virtually. Let's get ready for this, let's move forward without pause!

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