

**First Biennial Seneca Falls Dialogues**  
**On the occasion of the 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Seneca Falls Declaration**  
**Seneca Falls 11-12 October 2008**

**Keynote Presentation on the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights**



fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to “race, sex, language, or religion”. The Charter also establishes women’s right to equal participation in the Organization in Article 8, where it states that “the United Nations shall place no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate in any capacity and under conditions of equality in its principal and subsidiary organs”. Some of the women advocated for the establishment of a women’s commission in the Charter, but this idea was not retained at that stage.

As a result of this lobbying and discussi

The Commission on the Status of Women provided critical drafting inputs to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Ms Begtrup was an effective and persuasive spokesperson. As one author has observed “it seems that the absence of sexism in the Universal Declaration is primarily due to the aggressive lobbying of Ms Begtrup and the steady pressure of the Soviet delegation”. And, as the then director of the UN Division of Human Rights (who also oversaw at the time the branch that serviced the CSW) noted, “more perhaps than any other United Nations body, the delegates to the CSW were personally committed to its objectives ... and acted as a kind of lobby for the women of the world ... There was no more independent body in the UN. Many governments had appointed ... as their representatives women who were militants in their own countries.”

As had been the case with the Charter, a number of delegations headed by men helped shape the content and language of the Universal Declaration to explicitly set forth the equality of women, and to eliminate male-centred formulations. Words such as ‘men’ as synonym for humanity, and phrases such as ‘all men are brothers’ were not retained, thanks to the combined efforts of the Commission on the Status of Women and these delegates. Study of the history of the development of the Declaration reveals the importance of language and terminology. There was a struggle to achieve gender-sensitivity in the document, made all the more difficult by the fact that there was no unified position among the women involved in the process. Some women supported the use of the term “man” to refer to humankind; while others opposed this terminology very strongly.

The use of the phrases ‘everyone’ and ‘no one’ in the text strengthens the Declaration and confirms that many of the drafters intended it to be an inclusive document. It must, however, also be noted that a number of articles use the male pronoun, rather than both: for example, while Article 15 establishes in para 1 that “everyone has the right to a nationality”, it determines in para 2 that “no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of *his* nationality nor denied the right to change *his* nationality.” This pattern prevails in other articles as well.

The Declaration’s preamble reiterates the Charter’s preamble on the reaffirmation of the equal rights of men and women. Article 1, which retained almost verbatim the Commission’s proposal, reads: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” It does, however, also state that they should “act towards one another in a *spirit of brotherhood*”. Article 2, which sets out the fundamental right equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms without distinction, includes sex as one of the prohibited grounds of distinction, reiterates the other three contained in the Charter, and broadens it by adding several other grounds, such as colour, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

The fundamental right of equality and non-discrimination was thus established as a corner stone of the international human rights framework. The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights which was adopted by the General Assembly on 10 December 1948 by a vote of 48 in favour, with none against and 8 abstentions, ‘as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations’. It was hailed as a



and Political Rights, and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Convention sets out, in legally binding form, a comprehensive legal framework for women's equality, and establishes a focused, women-specific human rights regime. Adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 1979, the Convention now has 185 States parties which are obligated to translate its provisions into practice. Currently, there are eight Member States of the United Nations which have not yet ratified the Convention. [Member States that are not party to the Convention: Iran (Islamic Republic of), Nauru, Palau, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, Tonga, United States of America. The Holy See is not a State party.]

The Convention provides for women's equal enjoyment with men of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and requires States parties to eliminate discrimination against women not only in the public sphere, but also in the private sphere including within the family. It requires from States the practical realization of the principle of equality of women and men and requires States parties to pursue, 'by all appropriate means', and 'without delay', a policy of eliminating discrimination against women. Adherence to the Convention fosters a climate – both internationally and nationally - where violations of the rights of women will not be tolerated.

Implementation of the Convention is monitored by a Committee of 23 experts, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which reviews reports that all States parties are obliged to present on a regular basis in a constructive dialogue. In its concluding observations, the Committee provides country-specific guidance on further steps required by States parties concerned to accelerate compliance with the Convention's provisions. The Committee thereby holds States accountable for their compliance with their international legal obligations for the promotion and protection of the rights of women. By way of example, in the biennium 2006-2007, the Committee examined the status of Convention implementation in 69 States parties. In very many instances, the Committee benefited from the information provided by non-governmental women's organizations in those States who brought to the Committee's attention their priority concerns.

In addition to this general monitoring mechanism, the Optional Protocol to the

and murder of women in and around Ciudad Juárez in Mexico, which included a visit to the State party in the autumn of 2003. The Committee gave detailed recommendations to the State party for eliminating discrimination and bringing to an end the violations of the rights of women.

Complementing the standards and obligations under the Convention and the work of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against women, other human rights instruments and mechanisms also support the elimination of discrimination and the realization of the principle of equality of women and men. For example, the Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights obligate States parties to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of the rights enshrined in these instruments, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides for equality before the law and equal protection of the law without discrimination, including on grounds of sex. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is particularly pertinent to the situation of girls. The monitoring bodies under those treaties regularly address the rights of women and girls within the mandates provided by those treaties, including discrimination against women in the areas of employment, education, health, housing, trafficking, or political life. They have also examined gender-related forms of racial discrimination.

The work of the United Nations in the realm of standard-setting continues to this day, as part of the global community's continuou

in Vienna highlighted the promotion of all human rights instruments relating to women, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing called for action to address the systematic and systemic nature of discrimination against women in order to achieve the full realization of human rights for all. The Beijing Platform for Action identified human rights as one of the 12 critical areas of concern, and set strategic objectives and detailed action for achieving these rights for women and girls. Both conferences confirmed that the human rights of women and girls are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights and emphasized that the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by women and girls is a priority for Governments and the United Nations.

In the Millennium Declaration of 2000, Heads of State and Government resolved to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, to combat all forms of violence against women and to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Commitments to gender equality and the promotion of the human rights of women were also included in the 2005 World Summit Outcome.

The United Nations Security Council set a milestone in 2000 when it held its first-ever discussion on women and peace and



rights of women. As a result, many women's concerns are now explicitly addressed as

MDG 5 on improving maternal health remains the area where the least progress has been made among all the MDGs. More than 500,000 women die annually because of complications related to pregnancy and childbirth. Attendance by trained health workers during and after pregnancy and childbirth, and timely access to emergency obstetric services when life-threatening complications arise, are essential to preventing maternal mortality and disability.

Women's economic empowerment remains precarious in many parts of the world. Their significant contribution to ensuring food security is often not recognized or compensated. Fewer women than men have secure paid jobs in the formal economy, and women are more likely than men to be unpaid family workers or own-account workers with less or no security or benefits. Poor women are especially affected by the current increases in food prices. Laws continue to discriminate against women, denying them equal access with men to productive resources, including land, property and inheritance rights.

Increases in the percentage of women in parliament have been steady, but very slow and uneven across regions, and the global average is still only 18 per cent. Only 20 countries have achieved over 30 per cent female representation in parliament. In this context, I would like to recognize Rwanda, where recent elections have resulted in, for the first time in history, over 50 per cent women in parliament. President Ellen Johnson

Yet what we have achieved is far from enough. Remaining challenges and constraints in all areas illustrate that much more is needed to close the gap between the international standards, norms and policies and their implementation at the national level, for the benefit of all women. Eliminating stereotypes and prejudices, and modifying social and cultural patterns of conduct that discriminate against women and perpetuate inequality requires processes of deep societal change. Progress requires explicit commitment, concerted action, adequate resources and clear accountability for results. The lack of reliable, comparable data - a serious constraint to moving forward – needs to be explicitly addressed.

## **Conclusion**

Ensuring the human rights of women and girls – the theme of this dialogue - remains a critical path to gender equality and empowerment of women. Close collaboration among Governments, women’s organizations, academia and other actors has enabled the United Nations to set a strong agenda for gender equality and empowerment of women and to undertake significant work on the human rights of women. Strengthened collaboration is needed to accelerate implementation of this agenda and to ensure that it remains a priority of all stakeholders. We therefore look forward to your increased engagement in the work of the United Nations.

I would, for example, encourage all groups and networks represented here to be part of an important global initiative to remove violence and the threat of violence from the lives of women and girls in all parts of the world. The Secretary-General recently launched a multi-year campaign (2008-2015) “UNite to end violence against women” which aims to enhance advocacy at global levels, strengthen partnerships for action at regional and national levels, and increase the leadership role of the United Nations. The Secretary-General has called on all stakeholders and actors - including Governments, United Nations entities and other international and regional organizations, NGOs, the private sector, media and men’s groups and networks - to work with him on eradicating this significant human rights abuse by 2015.

Many of the participants here today have expressed their admiration for the courage and persistence of the women who lay behind the Seneca Falls Conference and Declaration of Sentiments in 1848 but have also raised concerns that we have fallen short of their ambitions. Many have noted that the process of change has been too slow. The President of the Conference Committee, Joan Bozer, has pointed out on a number of occasions that the excellent women’s groups and networks around the country would be a much stronger force for change if they could be mobilized to work together.

The dialogues you are initiating here today will provide an important means of mobilizing women and men

its very significant historical past, Seneca Falls could be a drawing point for a dynamic movement for change to ensure full achievement of the goals voiced here 160 years ago.

In this context, it is particularly encouraging to see the large numbers of young