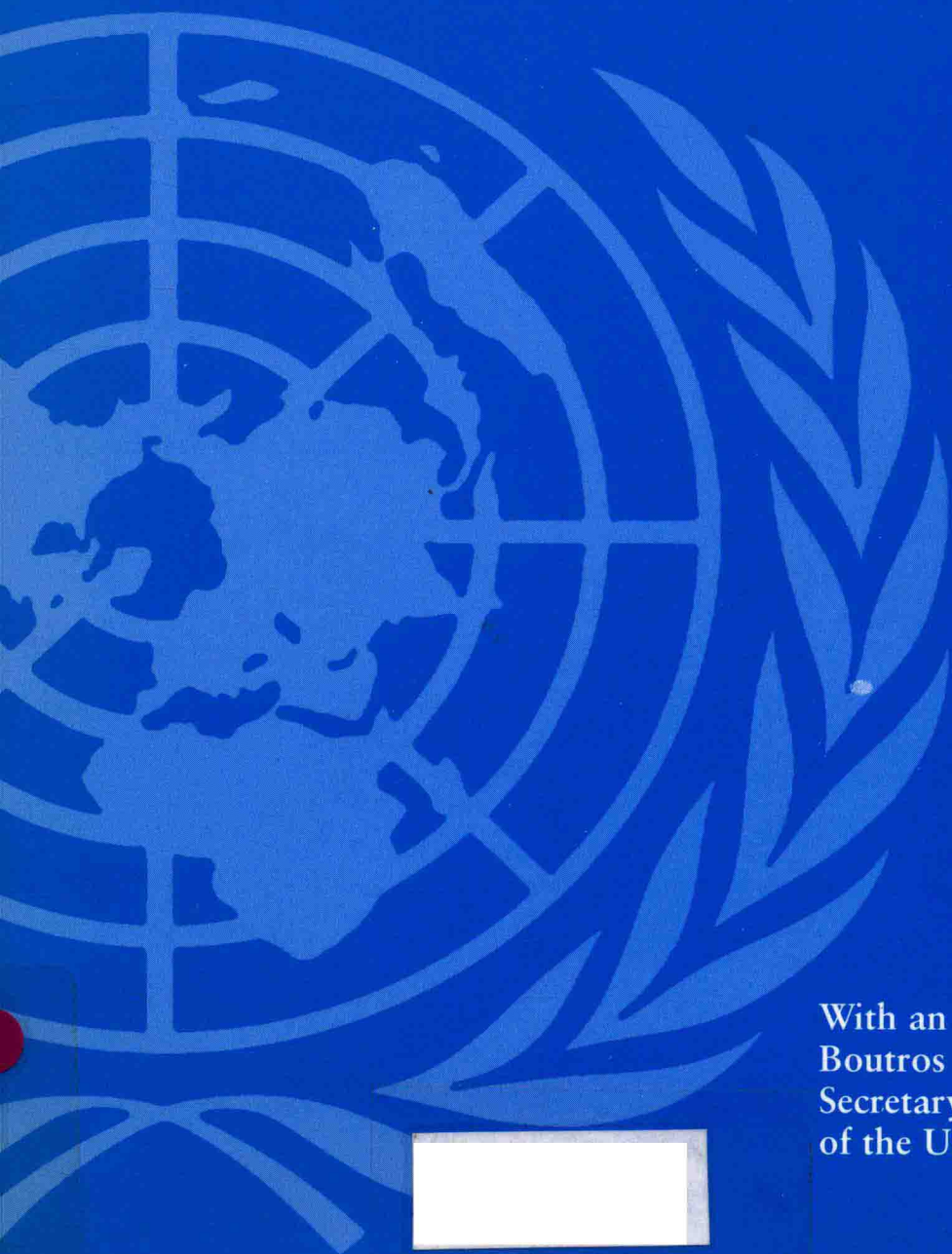


The United Nations and
**The Advancement
of Women**

1945-1995



With an introduction by
Boutros Boutros-Ghali,
Secretary-General
of the United Nations

The United Nations
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The United Nations and
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Contents

Section One:

Introduction by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Secretary-General of the United Nations

I	Overview	3
II	Securing the legal foundations of equality, 1945-1962	8
III	Recognizing women's role in development, 1963-1975	26
IV	The United Nations Decade for Women, 1976-1985	37
V	Towards equality, development and peace, 1986-1995	48
VI	Conclusion	64

Section Two:

Chronology and Documents

I	Chronology of events	69
II	Chronology of United Nations conferences and seminars	77
III	List of reproduced documents	83
IV	Texts of documents	93
VI	Subject index to documents	677
VII	Index	685

Section One

Introduction





I Overview

1 Few causes promoted by the United Nations have generated more intense and widespread support than the campaign to promote and protect the equal rights of women. Fifty years after the Charter of the United Nations became the first international agreement to proclaim gender equality as a fundamental human right, the Organization has helped create a historic legacy of internationally agreed strategies, standards, programmes and goals to advance the status of women worldwide.

2 Then as now, the Charter pointed the way, affirming the equal rights of men and women and declaring that the work of the Organization must be conducted without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.¹ But the Charter's words are not self-enforcing. Decades of struggle were needed to elevate the human rights of women to a prominent place on the international agenda. Beginning with the codification of women's legal and civil rights, the campaign for the advancement of women has stirred widespread recognition of their indispensable role in addressing the critical issues facing the world in the late twentieth century: poverty; unemployment; social disintegration; unchecked population growth; human rights abuses; environmental degradation; militarism. Throughout this process, the United Nations has played a unique role: as a catalyst for change, as a global standard setter for the eradication of gender discrimination; as a forum for debate; and as an unparalleled source of balanced, comprehensive data on the status of women worldwide.

1/ Document 1
See page 93

3 Although the international women's movement began at the grass-roots level many years before the founding of the United Nations, the Organization moved quickly to affirm that the advancement of women was central to its work. Half a century later, four progressive phases are discernible in the evolution of these efforts.

4 In the first period, from 1945 to 1962, the United Nations worked to secure women's legal equality. The United Nations was born at a time when women in most regions faced numerous obstacles in law and in fact. These included inequalities in laws and customs concerning marriage and the family. In education, they were denied the same opportunities as men and boys. Entering the workforce in rapidly growing numbers, they found barriers in both employment and pay. In politics, women were often denied the right to vote, to hold office or otherwise to participate in political life.

5 Stirred by the determined efforts of Member States' female delegates and by the collective energy of non-governmental organizations

2/ Document 6
See page 102;
Document 14
See page 115

(NGOs), the United Nations moved to address these symptoms of discrimination on a worldwide basis. With the creation of the Commission on Human Rights and the Commission on the Status of Women in 1946, and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the Organization began its work on behalf of women with a drive to establish the legal basis for the promotion of their equal rights.²

6 But this was no simple task. It was one thing to reaffirm the Charter's mandate to uphold faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of all people and in the equal rights of men and women. It was quite another to put these principles into practice on a universal scale.

7 The Commission on the Status of Women recognized that the process of codifying the legal rights of women had to begin with factual information about the extent to which discrimination against women existed in law and in practice. The United Nations thus embarked on a vast research and polling effort to assess the status of women worldwide.

8 Subsequent United Nations fact-finding efforts produced a detailed, country-by-country picture of the political and legal status of women, cataloguing the gains and identifying the remaining obstacles. Over time, these findings became the basis for global standards that were incorporated into international law through a series of treaties and conventions. In drafting these human rights instruments, close working relationships began to develop between the Commission on the Status of Women and other United Nations bodies such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as well as other intergovernmental organizations such as the Inter-American Commission of Women. At the national level, Governments were asked to develop laws and programmes to deal with such imperatives as women's political and legal rights; women's access to education and training; women's employment; and combating violence against women.

9 During the second period, from 1963 to 1975, more and more Governments responded to the United Nations by adopting laws and programmes to protect women's rights. Impetus for this came in 1967 when the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.³ The Organization's focus broadened from codification of equality of rights under the law to encompass the economic and social realities of women's daily lives. Such matters as policy formulation, attitude change, political commitment and institution-building came to the forefront, particularly as they affected women in developing countries. Recognition grew among the international community that development was essential if women were to achieve equality, and the United Nations increasingly structured its development assistance programmes to meet this challenge.

3/ Document 36
See page 165

10 The campaign for women's advancement gathered irresistible momentum with the proclamation of 1975 as International Women's Year and the convening, that same year, of the first major conference on the status of women. Held in Mexico City, the World Conference of the International Women's Year helped mobilize women around the world, expanded the working relationship between the United Nations and NGOs and led to the elucidation of a three-part theme—equality, development and peace—which became the basis for the Organization's work for women in the years to follow.⁴

4/ Document 45

See page 177

11 The third phase, from 1976 to 1985, coincided with the United Nations Decade for Women, a period which saw the international community undergo an important transformation in its understanding of the role of women. Whereas previous thinking had regarded women almost exclusively in terms of their development needs, the Decade augmented and updated this viewpoint by recognizing women as essential contributors to the entire development process. This new awareness was borne out by statistics collected and published by the United Nations which dramatized the fact that women's equality and rights, far from being isolated issues, were important factors in the well-being of societies everywhere. The undervaluation of women was identified as both a cause and an effect of underdevelopment, closely linked to such global problems as poverty, overpopulation, illiteracy, food shortages, malnutrition and poor health conditions.

12 The impact of these findings—and of the global consciousness-raising that the Decade helped promote—cannot be overestimated. One direct result was an increased momentum towards the adoption by the General Assembly of a landmark treaty in the struggle for women's rights: the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which constitutes an international bill of human rights for women.⁵ The Decade also generated a series of action programmes that recognized the importance of women's role in development and the need to expand United Nations assistance to women in developing countries. And it energized global efforts to promote the equality of men and women; to acknowledge women's contributions to development at all levels; and to recognize their role in charting a route to disarmament and lasting peace.

5/ Document 69

See page 234

13 Another watershed was reached in 1985 with a world conference on women in Nairobi, held to mark the end of the Decade for Women and assess its achievements. As in Mexico City in 1975 and again in Copenhagen in 1980, women from widely varying political and cultural backgrounds gathered to review progress made in their struggle for advancement. Delegates at Nairobi adopted the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000, a

blueprint for women's future in all realms of life and another milestone on the path to equality.⁶

14 In the fourth and current phase, from 1986 to the present, the work of the United Nations for women's rights has been closely tied to the dramatic changes that have occurred in world affairs. The post-cold-war era has allowed the Organization to redouble its efforts in many areas of long-standing concern, among them the advancement of the status of women. United Nations institutions and mechanisms have been strengthened, and support for women has been woven into the mainstream efforts of all the Organization's agencies and bodies.

15 Within this new climate, a continuum of United Nations conferences and summit meetings has served as a cohesive vehicle through which the international community has been able to address the advancement of women across a broad yet interlocking spectrum of issues and concerns. The 1990 World Summit for Children set goals for health, education and nutrition for women and their children. The 1992 Earth Summit called for the full integration of women in the task of solving environmental problems and promoting sustainable development. The 1993 World Conference on Human Rights affirmed women's rights as a central element in the overall global human rights agenda, and stressed the importance of confronting the specific problem of violence against women. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development produced agreement on the connection between demographic issues and the advancement of women through education, health and nutrition. And the 1995 World Summit for Social Development synthesized these achievements, recognizing the pivotal role of women in eradicating poverty and mending the social fabric.

16 All of these events have focused the world's attention on a central organizing principle of the work of the United Nations: that no enduring solution to society's most threatening social, economic and political problems can be found without the full participation, and the full empowerment, of the world's women. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women promises to build on this principle in the journey towards peace, women's rights and social development.

17 Thanks to the efforts of the United Nations, the encouragement of Governments and the tireless work of NGOs, public acceptance and awareness of the rights of women have never been so widespread. Millions of women, especially in developing countries and newly independent States, have begun moving towards self-realization and self-sufficiency.

18 Nevertheless, much remains to be done. As United Nations studies have shown, the world's 2.7 billion women remain humanity's largest excluded group. Women outnumber men in the one fifth of humanity living in absolute poverty. In developed and developing coun-

tries alike, they suffer a disproportionate share of the effects of social disintegration, unemployment, environmental degradation and war. And in many countries there is a vast gap between women's rights on paper, according to law and policy, and their actual experience.

19 This Introduction traces the history of the United Nations campaign to confront these problems and to promote and attain the advancement of women. Part II chronicles the Organization's early efforts to secure the legal foundations of women's rights, a process that began with the creation of institutions and mechanisms to ensure that women's issues remained prominent on the global human rights agenda. Part III examines the next stage of the Organization's work, which began with recognition of the indispensable role of women in development and of the chasm between the existence of women's rights in law and the exercise of those rights in fact. Parts IV and V examine how the years of codification and implementation have given way to an era of new and more complex challenges, in which the political and economic empowerment of women is seen increasingly as the key not only to ending gender discrimination, but to eradicating poverty, enhancing productive employment and ending social disintegration. Part VI presents some concluding remarks on the strategies and issues that will figure most prominently in the Organization's next half-century of work in improving opportunities for women and eliminating gender-based discrimination once and for all.

20 The collection of documents reproduced on pages 93-676 in Section Two represents a selection of the many thousands of documents on women published by the United Nations which form a comprehensive record of the involvement of the Organization in the campaign to promote women's rights. Included are the complete texts of the major conventions, treaties and declarations, selected resolutions of the General Assembly and other United Nations bodies, reports and other relevant materials.

II Securing the legal foundations of equality, 1945-1962

21 The long, devastating Second World War saw numerous barriers to women fall as a natural consequence of the war effort. In many countries, men and women worked, fought and suffered together as equals. Many hoped the end of the conflict would yield a peacetime world energized by the same spirit, a world in which women could enjoy the same freedoms and status as men. Within months, the framers of the United Nations Charter, prodded by women's groups and delegates, succeeded in weaving this vision into the fabric of the Organization's founding document.

22 The United Nations involvement in women's issues marked the beginning of a historic change in political discourse, in which issues once thought of as strictly private, domestic matters steeped in custom and tradition—such as the status of women as wives, home-makers and mothers—would come to be openly debated in a global context. It triggered the first phase of the Organization's activities on behalf of women: the codification in law of women's rights and the collection of data documenting the situation of women in many parts of the world. Such surveys were a vital first step in the central United Nations goal of setting standards for the international community.

23 Early United Nations surveys showed that discrimination against women was prevalent in nearly every region of the world. In most societies, women were not free to do such things as attend the same schools as men, own property or receive equal pay for equal work. Discrimination in political and civil life was particularly widespread. In 1945, only 30 of the original 51 United Nations Member States allowed women equal voting rights with men or permitted them to hold public office. Just a handful of women were involved in the founding of the United Nations. Of the 160 signatories of the United Nations Charter, a mere four were women.

24 The United Nations built upon the early work of other inter-governmental bodies, establishing international treaties and acting as a catalyst for the promotion of laws asserting the equal rights of women. These efforts required the creation of new institutional capabilities, including the creation of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. The Commission helped ensure that provisions on women's equality were included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly in 1948, and used the principles of the Declaration as the basis for its work.⁷ The early years of United Nations

support for women focused upon establishing women's legal equality in such areas as political participation, work, education, nationality and marriage.

Building momentum for women's rights

25 International efforts to address problems involving the status of women began at the turn of the century, as the women's suffrage movement—whose roots went back to the 1860s—gathered momentum. In 1902, Governments meeting in The Hague, the Netherlands, adopted a series of conventions aimed at setting international standards for marriage, divorce and the custody of minor children. Soon after, comparable measures were adopted concerning the abolition of trafficking in women and children.

26 Much of the conceptual groundwork for the Charter's language on women's rights grew out of the pioneering efforts of the Pan American Union (the precursor to the Organization of American States) and the League of Nations. Meeting in 1923 in Santiago, the Pan American Union agreed to address the question of how to eliminate legal and constitutional impediments to the exercise of women's political and civil rights. By 1928, delegates gathered in Havana had decided to create the Inter-American Commission of Women, whose mandate was to examine the status of women in Latin America as a first step towards achieving equality for women in civil and political fields. The Inter-American Commission's work led to the adoption, in 1933, of the Montevideo Convention on the Nationality of Married Women, the first international treaty to proclaim the equality of the sexes in regard to nationality.

27 In 1935, the League of Nations endorsed the Montevideo Convention on the Nationality of Married Women as worthy of ratification by all of its members. The League took several other steps on behalf of women, beginning with the adoption of its Covenant on 28 April 1919, which declared that member countries should work to guarantee fair and humane working conditions for men, women and children, and to discourage trafficking in women and children. It also decreed that membership in the League Secretariat would be open to women.

28 The issue of trafficking in women—a central focus of anti-slavery efforts early in the century—was also a concern of the League of Nations. The League's work helped prepare the way for the United Nations General Assembly's adoption of a treaty outlawing exploitation of prostitution. The agreement, the 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, was approved by the General Assembly on 2 December 1949 and came into force on 25 July 1951.⁸ It helped establish the principle that

8/ Document 18
See page 120

to countenance the treatment of women as commodities—dehumanized objects that could be bought and sold—helped perpetuate women’s low status in many societies.

29 Pressed by non-governmental organizations and female delegates, the League began a survey of the state of women’s rights as a preparatory step in drawing up new international agreements. Information was gathered on matters such as voting rights, administration of property and earnings, guardianship of children and the right to work. The data revealed wide differences among countries.

30 In 1937, the League undertook a more ambitious project: a study of the legal status of women worldwide. The study, aimed at assessing the effects of public, private and penal law, was to be carried out by several scientific institutions and overseen by an expert committee empowered to consult regularly with women’s groups. However, shortly after one of the three sections was completed—on the status of women under private law—the Second World War erupted in Europe. The survey was never completed.

The Charter of the United Nations

31 The Charter of the United Nations, signed on 26 June 1945, set out three main goals for the new Organization: to prevent future wars by fostering peace and security; to promote social and economic progress; and to define and protect the rights and freedoms of every human being regardless of race, sex, language or religion.⁹ The Preamble begins: “We the peoples of the United Nations”, and reaffirms not only “faith in fundamental human rights” and the “dignity and worth of the human person”, but also “the equal rights of men and women”. The equality of rights is also explicitly asserted in three Articles of the Charter.

32 Earlier drafts of the Charter did not start out that way. The passages outlawing discrimination on the basis of sex were introduced later, at the insistence of women delegates and representatives of the 42 NGOs accredited to the founding Conference.

33 For the women present at the birth of the United Nations, the Charter’s provisions on women’s equality offered a clear and compelling basis for the assertion of international law to advance the political and legal status of women. Although international and intergovernmental bodies had begun working to advance the status of women long before 1945, no previous legal document had so forcefully affirmed the equality of all human beings, or specifically outlawed sex as a basis for discrimination.

9/ Document 1
See page 93

The first General Assembly convenes

34 In 1946, during the inaugural meetings of the United Nations General Assembly in London, the issue of women's rights reappeared as a prominent item on the international agenda for the first time since the beginning of the Second World War. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, a United Nations delegate representing the United States of America, appeared before the General Assembly and read an open letter addressed to "the women of the world" that she and 16 other women attending the session had prepared.¹⁰

10/ Document 2

See page 93

35 The open letter, dated 12 February 1946, hailed the coming of peace to a democratic world—and the vital role that women had played in making victory possible. "This new chance for peace", the letter pointed out, "was won through the joint efforts of men and women working for the common ideals of human freedom at a time when need for united effort broke down barriers of race, creed and sex". The five-paragraph letter expressed the hope that women's involvement in the United Nations "may grow and may increase in insight and skill". It called on Governments "to encourage women everywhere to take a more active part in national and international affairs". Several delegations spoke strongly in support of these views, urging that the Organization bring more women into its work.¹¹

11/ Document 2

See page 93

36 The founding delegates were well aware that shaping a post-war world dedicated to the ideals of the Charter of the United Nations would take far more than good intentions. For one thing, the United Nations bodies dedicated to ensuring equality of rights for men and women had to work within the context of Article 2, paragraph 7, of the Charter, which affirms that the Organization has no authority to intervene in matters that are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any State. There was a widespread opinion in the early years of the United Nations that this principle extended to the question of human rights.

37 Moreover, it was clear that years of preparatory work would be needed to pave the way for the international instruments that would be necessary to promote equality of rights between men and women. The international community had to agree on a definition of these rights and on what was necessary to ensure that they were enjoyed by everyone. This would require comprehensive surveys and studies of the extent to which women were discriminated against in law and in practice. Fact-finding and standard-setting thus became the main preoccupations of the United Nations in its early efforts to secure the legal foundations of women's equality.

Subcommission on the Status of Women

38 The Charter of the United Nations specified that the Economic and Social Council—one of the six main organs of the United Nations—

should have responsibility for promoting human rights, including women's rights. The Council was authorized to establish commissions in economic and social fields and for the promotion of human rights. Its chief operational arm in this field is the Commission on Human Rights, which was established in February 1946 under Article 68 of the Charter. The first seven members appointed to the projected 18-member body consisted of six men and Mrs. Roosevelt as Chair.¹²

12/ Document 3
See page 99

39 After considerable debate, the Council concluded that the Commission on Human Rights would require "special advice" on problems relating to the status of women, and that this would necessitate creating a special body.¹³ Many female delegates and representatives of non-governmental organizations had strongly advocated that the United Nations establish a body specifically dedicated to women's issues. They did this not because they viewed women's rights as somehow distinct from human rights, but out of concern that the Commission on Human Rights would be so preoccupied with carrying out its other mandates that eliminating discrimination against women would not be a priority.

13/ Document 3
See page 99

40 In February 1946, the Council voted to create the Subcommittee on the Status of Women, a separate, subsidiary body to the Commission on Human Rights. The Subcommittee's overall mandate, the Council said, would be to "submit proposals, recommendations and reports to the Commission on Human Rights regarding the status of women".¹⁴

14/ Document 3
See page 99

41 The first seven members of the Subcommittee were women, but three persons were to be appointed *ex officio* to ensure that it was not composed of women only.¹⁵ The Subcommittee first met from 29 April to 13 May 1946 at the Bronx campus of Hunter College in New York (now Lehman College) to draw up a programme of work. The recommendations made by the Subcommittee to the Council included proposals for a United Nations women's conference to discuss the aims of the Subcommittee; a worldwide survey of laws affecting women; the compilation of records on matters pertaining to women; polling efforts to sound out public opinion; a forum to hear the views of experts; and the launching of a worldwide campaign to inform the public about women's issues with the help of the United Nations Department of Public Information.¹⁶

15/ Document 3
See page 99;
Document 4
See page 100

42 The Subcommittee decided it was especially important that improvements for women be brought about in the political, civil, education, social and economic fields, and that these would be addressed simultaneously in cooperation with organizations affiliated with the United Nations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). The Subcommittee also proposed a universal survey of laws pertaining to the status of women. A comparable survey by the League of Nations was considered outdated and somewhat limited in

16/ Document 5
See page 101