

## Women's organizations in the United Nations<sup>1</sup>

The RoSa-factsheets aim to familiarise you with the scope of equal opportunities in Flanders. Each factsheet probes the situation in a specific area. Broad themes as well as specific ones are put into the spotlight, depending on the relevance and/or availability of information and numerical data. We do not intend to offer exhaustive information, our primary aim is to sketch the position of women in Flanders in a surveyable and accessible way. Since its founding in 1978, RoSa is the place in Flanders to look for information and documentation about equal opportunities, emancipation policy and women's studies.

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*We are living in an increasingly globalised world. International events and tendencies are influencing local lives more and more. Within the feminist movement too, the awareness grew last century that worldwide events often have local consequences and that local circumstances are often part of worldwide history. Consequently, an international women's liberation movement was bound to arise. The United Nations played a crucial role in the organization of an international women's organization.*

*The struggle for gender equality was still in its infancy at the foundation of the United Nations in 1945. Originally, there were 51 countries, 30 of which had voting rights for women. The United Nations would become very important for women's rights from its foundation. The **Charter of the United Nations** is the first international instrument that specifically mentions equal rights of men and women. It phrases the determination of the peoples of the United Nations to "reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women". This principle is further detailed in the **Universal Declaration** that says that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and that "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."*

### Working on women's rights within the UN

Three bodies work on gender and women's rights within the United Nations: the DAW, the INSTRAW and the UNIFEM. Two committees keep watch on the issue: the CSW and the CEDAW. Finally, there is a special advisory body about gender, the OSAGI and a UN gender network, the IANWGE. The latter two founded a specialized information point about gender that is worth mentioning: Womenwatch. Roughly speaking, UN bodies working on women's issues, which are strongly connected with the World Conference on Women, were founded in three phases: the DAW and the CSW were created with the foundation of the UN in 1945; the CEDAW the INSTRAW and the UNIFEM were

established in the aftermath of the UN Decade of The Woman (1975-1985) and the Mexico Conference; the OSAGI and the IANWGE were created thanks to the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995.

### **Obligations regarding UN- decisions**

Treaties and agreements are binding for the countries that sign and ratify them, final documents of UN conferences are not, they only have a moral bond. They are compelling for countries that sign them, but these countries are not obliged to ratify them. In each treaty, the minimum number of ratifications which is needed to start, is indicated. Only if this number is reached, will the treaty enter into effect. International law states that a country must fulfil its treaty obligations in good faith. Giving sanctions almost never happens.<sup>2</sup>

## **The commissions**

### **CSW: COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

#### *What?*

The **Commission on the Status of Women** is the most important instrument for women's emancipation in the UN. It was set up in 1946 under the supervision of the human rights commission, which is a member itself of the Economic and Social Council. Soon the CSW became an independent member (as functional commission) of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

#### *Who?*

45 countries are represented in the Commission. Those seats are divided on a geographical base. The Commission has a political composition (all members are representatives of their countries and do not take action on personal authority). Belgium is temporarily member of the CWS until 2007.

#### *What do they do?*

The Commission has to make sure that men and women get equal rights. Most of its powers to do so, were established at the foundation of the CSW in 1946. Expansion of those competences came after the World conferences on women of 1985 and 1995.

- The CSW advises the Economic and Social Council on what can be done to improve women's rights politically, economically, civilly, socially and educationally. It can also propose measures to solve an urgent problem concerning women's rights.
- CSW draws up resolutions and agreements that are binding after approval by the General Assembly. The most important example is CEDAW from 1979 (Cf infra).
- The CSW prepares the world conferences on women together with the DAW and keeps control of the observance of final documents by the Member States.

The Commission meets for ten days each year. The management committee works throughout the year and is a part of DAW (Cf infra).

The Commission made sure that the General Assembly ratified a few important conventions. The most important one is the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) of 1979.

#### *Within the UN structure*

Commission with elected members, therefore there is no permanent activity. It is a part of the Economic and Social Commission. (<http://www.un.org/esa/progareas/women.html>)

#### *More information*

Please consult the site of CSW. There you can find their membership list, reports of the meetings and follow-up documents. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/index.html>

## **CEDAW: CONVENTION AND COMMITTEE FOR THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN**

### *What?*

The CEDAW stands both for the treaty itself and for the Commission which must ensure the implementation of it.

### **The convention**

The CEDAW is sometimes described as an international 'Bill of Rights' for women. The full title is '**Convention and Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women**'. It is the most important tool for women's human rights. The Convention, which consists of six parts and 30 articles, discusses the measures that states have to take to reduce discrimination against women in all kinds of areas. It defines the women's human rights within the context of the universal regime of human rights and reflects the evolution as from the recognition of the legal rights of the woman up to and including the use of it in practice. On 2 March 2006 the convention was signed by 182 countries. (More information <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/states.htm> for a recent state of affairs) The complete text of the convention can be found on <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm>

### **Optional Protocol**

An individual right of complaints was attached to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, in the form of an Optional Protocol. That individual procedure of complaints was a proposal of Belgium already in 1976, but was put back on the agenda at the human rights conference in Vienna. After a long struggle it was approved in 1999. OP provides in a legal procedure, but first it has to be signed and ratified once more. Individuals get the right to lodge a complaint with the committee. Moreover, an investigation into violations can be started in countries who signed and ratified the convention and the protocol. Belgium ratified the CEDAW in 1981<sup>3</sup>, the Operational Protocol in 2003.

### **The committee**

The CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women) also represents the commission which has to take care of the compliance with the Agreement.

### *Who?*

The CEDAW committee consists of 23 experts who are elected for a four-year term by the countries who have signed the Agreement. They meet two times a year to evaluate the country reports.

### *What do they do?*

The States parties have to present a report in which they discuss the measures they have taken. The committee evaluates the reports and makes recommendations to the countries. The committee does not have any power to impose sanctions and draw recommendations. Belgium published its latest report in 2006.

### *Within the UN structure*

Committee with elected members, so not a permanent activity.

Under the authority of the Department of Economic and Social affairs (<http://www.un.org/esa/progareas/women.html>)

### *More information*

The site also gives a survey of the list of the State parties, the country reports, the members of the committee and their evaluations, the reports of the meetings, etc. In addition to this, the site provides the integral text of the convention.

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

### DAW: UN DIVISION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

#### *What?*

The Department for the Advancement of Women guarantees the permanent representation of women in the UN. The DAW is the administration of equal opportunities that the UN offers. As opposed to the DAW, which is a permanent body in the UN, the CSW and the CEDAW exist of committees with alternate members who only gather a couple of times. Therefore, it is very influential. The DAW was established in 1946 together with the CSW.

#### *Who?*

The DAW works with permanent staff. Their contact details can be found on the website of the DAW:

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/daw/index.html>

#### *What do they do?*

The DAW, the department for the promotion of the women, has to encourage the participation of women in society.

#### **DAW:**

- Fosters the promotion of gender equality within the UN entities as well as on an international level.
- Carries out research and provides policy recommendations.
- Stimulates the interaction between national governments and international policy processes.
- Acts as a secretariat of the CEDAW and prepares the activities of the CSW and the United Nations Conferences on Women.
- Promotes and supports gender-mainstreaming within the different policy levels.

#### *Within the UN structure*

Permanent body of the UN, with permanent staff.

It is a part of the Economic and Social Council.

(<http://www.un.org/esa/progareas/women.html>)

More information such as history, reports, country reports, news and calendar can be found on the website of DAW:

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/daw/index.html>

### UNIFEM: UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT FUND FOR WOMEN

#### *What?*

The UNIFEM is the women's fund at the United Nations. It was founded in 1976 and it arose from the first conference on women in Mexico in 1975. The funds come from voluntary gifts of governments, companies, organisations and individuals. The UNIFEM not only has its headquarters in the UN, it also has different regional departments, which are responsible for fund recruitment and fund attribution.

#### *Who?*

Permanent body within the UN with permanent staff. Contact details of the headquarters and the regional departments can be found on the following website: <http://www.unifem.org/>

#### *What do they do?*

The UNIFEM provides financial and technical assistance to innovative programs and strategies to foster women's empowerment and gender equality.

The UNIFEM focuses its activities on four strategic areas:

1. Reducing feminized poverty
2. Ending violence against women
3. Reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS among women and girls
4. Achieving gender equality in democratic governance

*Within the UN structure*

The fund was founded by the United Nations General Assembly and it is also a part of it.

*More information*

The website provides information about the organisation, the regional departments and projects and also interesting factsheets about the four 'critical areas of concern'.  
<http://www.unifem.org/>

**INSTRAW: INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN**

*What?*

The International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) was founded in 1976 to conduct research and to establish training programmes on an international level. The INSTRAW does not receive budget from the UN, but acquires funds through contributions of Member States and volunteers.

*Who?*

The executive board of the INSTRAW is composed of representatives from ten Member States. These Member States are elected by the ECOSOC for a three-year term. They meet once a year. The daily work is carried out by permanent staff.

*What do they do?*

The INSTRAW promotes and conducts research on gender. It stimulates and supports the exchange of information and research by uniting different actors: UN entities governments, academics and citizens.

They identified a number of strategic purposes:

- **Applied research:** research on existing gender policies, finding gaps in existing research and policies, drawing up good examples, giving feedback to local, regional and international governments.
- **Exchanging and disseminating information:** creating methods to efficiently manage and disseminate relevant know-how to governments and programmes.
- Tackling new problems with the acquired competence about gender and mainstreaming.

*Within the UN structure*

The INSTRAW is an independent UN entity that reports to the ECOSOC.

*More information*

For their strategic plan 2004-2007, meeting reports and a survey of their research and development programme, please consult the website.  
[www.un-instraw.org](http://www.un-instraw.org)

**Advice, network and information**

**OSAGI: OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL ADVISER ON GENDER ISSUES AND THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN**

*What?*

The office for advice on gender and women is the second permanent body within the Economic and Social Council of the UN, besides the DAW, that deals with gender and women. It was founded in 1997 and resulted from the Beijing Action Platform.

The OSAGI's mission is to promote and to strengthen the effective realization of the Millennium Declaration and the Beijing Action Platform.

#### *Who?*

The OSAGI has permanent staff headed by a chairman, the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women. It consists of two divisions: Gender Mainstreaming and the Focal Point for women, each with their own staff. For contact details, please consult this website: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/aboutosagi.htm>

#### *What do they do?*

The OSAGI follows up on the implementation of the Beijing Action Platform by:

- Preparing policy advice for the DAW (Division for the Advancement of Women), the CEDAW (Convention of the Elimination of all sorts of Discrimination Against Women), the CSW (Commission on the Status of Women) and the ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council)
- Gender mainstreaming of programmes and activities of intergovernmental forums and UN entities
- Developing an intergovernmental agenda for *women, peace and security* (resolution 1325 of the Security Council, see [www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/))
- Developing gender equality strategies within UN organisations.
- Fostering inter-agency collaboration

Whereas the DAW aims to encourage and promote equal opportunities within the Member States, the OSAGI does the same within the UN organisations.

#### *Within the UN structure*

Permanent body within the UN, with permanent staff.

Is part of the Economic and Social Council (<http://www.un.org/esa/progareas/women.html>)

#### *More information*

The website provides reports, recommendations, instruments, data of the various divisions and focal points: Gender mainstreaming, Focal Point for Women and Women, Peace and Security. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/>

## **IANWGE: INTER-AGENCY NETWORK ON WOMEN AND GENDER EQUALITY**

#### *What?*

The IANWGE is a network of UN offices, specialised agencies, funds and programmes. All UN members are represented in the network.

#### *Who?*

The IANWGE chairman is appointed by the UN Secretary-General and is also the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women. The IANWGE consists of approximately 60 members from all entities of the UN system. The members meet annually. The DAW acts as a secretariat.

#### *What do they do?*

The IANWGE follows up on the implementation of the Beijing Action Platform and other gender related recommendations within the UN system. The IANWGE supervises the introduction of a gender perspective in the UN programmatic, normative and operational work.

#### *Within the UN structure*

Network within the UN

#### *More information*

Annual assembly reports, an overview of the activities and a members list can be found on the following site: [www.un.org/womenwatch/ianwge/index.html](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/ianwge/index.html)

## WOMENWATCH

### *What?*

Womenwatch is the central information point on gender and women's rights within the UN. This project was created in 1997 as a consequence of the Beijing Action Platform.

### *Who?*

Womenwatch was founded by the 3 UN entities that work on gender: DAW, UNIFEM and INSTRAW and is coordinated by IANWGE. A commission of gender workers of the UN entities, which holds annual meetings, provides supervision on a voluntary basis.

### *What do they do?*

Womenwatch allows you to visit all UN websites and tools on gender equality and empowerment of women. This portal site provides information for all entities, commissions, programmes and organizations within the UN that work on gender.

### *Within the UN structure*

Project of the UN, outside the United Nations System

### *More information*

All information about women and gender within the UN can be found on the following site: [www.un.org/womenwatch](http://www.un.org/womenwatch). This site also provides you information and news, a very practical "directory of UN resources" for gender.

## Attention to women within other UN bodies.

Partly thanks to a persistent gender mainstreaming policy, many UN entities have a specialized gender working group for their field of work. An outline of the 49 active gender working groups within other UN bodies can be found via the gender directory on [www.instraw.org](http://www.instraw.org). Besides a brief explanation about the UN entity involved, you get a direct link to their gender working group and/or gender related documents.

The gender directory: <http://www.un-instraw.org/en/index.php?option=content&task=category&sectionid=5&id=24&Itemid=91&limit=50&limitstart=0>

Or via <http://www.un-instraw.org/> go to 'about INSTRAW' / gender and UN / click on 'genderdirectory'

## The world conferences on women

The world conferences on women are an initiative of the CSW. They wanted to assemble the various Member States to discuss women's rights. By doing this, people wanted to identify new strategic aims and specify the CEDAW treaty. The final documents of the world conference on women are detailed action plans. The documents, however, differ from each other: Unlike the final documents, the CEDAW treaty is binding for the countries that ratified the treaty. The conferences make sure that the international community pulls in the same direction. The four conferences on women<sup>4</sup> continued to give an important incentive to working on gender equality within the UN. In 2005, there was no conference but a follow-up. After all, people feared that the Beijing resolutions would be weakened again.

### 1975: MEXICO

The first world conference on women in Mexico meant the historical start of a worldwide dialogue on gender equality. Especially the basic principles were innovative. Women were no longer seen as passive receivers of support and aid, but as equal partners with equal rights. At the start, three crucial aims were identified:

1. Full gender equality and the elimination of gender discrimination
2. The integration and the full participation of women in development cooperation
3. An increasing participation of women working on world peace

This resulted in a World Plan of Action, which had to be executed in the following Decade for Women. This plan challenged the governments to draw up national plans and aims. Towards the end of the Decade for Women, 127 Member States had set up new programmes and institutions for the emancipation of women. In 1979, the CEDAW treaty for women was drawn up: a historical landmark. Within the UN, the first world conference led to the foundation of UNIFEM and INSTRAW. At the Mexico Conference, it was also important that women(organizations) themselves largely participated, which resulted in cooperation and exchange between women(organizations) worldwide.

#### **1980: COPENHAGEN**

Five years later, the second world conference on women in Copenhagen provided the opportunity for a worldwide evaluation. Although a lot of progress was made, it came to notice that equal rights did not necessarily bring along equal opportunities. In order to realize Mexico's three crucial objectives, special attention had to be drawn to the equal access of women to education, to the labour market and to health care. For this purpose, the Copenhagen action programme was developed.

#### **1985: NAIROBI**

The third world conference on women in Nairobi has been noted to give rise to global feminism. Never before had so many women's organizations taken part in an international conference. A parallel NGO forum, where 15,000 NGOs exchanged knowledge, was introduced for the first time. Although one had worked hard to obtain woman rights in the previous decade, the conclusion arose, at the Nairobi conference, that the objectives of Mexico and Copenhagen were far from achieved. It was essential to adopt a new approach and so the Nairobi conference set a new milestone: In the Forward Looking Strategies, which were identified in Nairobi, all topics were declared to be women's topics. For the first time women's rights were not considered to be a separate policy area, but as a matter which had to be looked after in all policy areas. Nairobi on the web: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/confer/nfls/>

#### **1995: BEIJING**

The fourth world conference on women in Beijing was once more a significant milestone. The action plans of the previous conferences had improved the conditions of women in many areas, but the fundamental structure of gender inequality remained the same. In the nineties it became clear that equal participation of women in decision-making processes at all levels is the key to equivalence.

One thing that was absolutely innovative at the Beijing Conference was the shift in focus on women to the concept of gender and the introduction of gender mainstreaming. The entire structure of our society had to be reconsidered, as well as the relationships between men and women. These new insights resulted in the Beijing Action Platform: an action programme on '12 critical areas of concern': <sup>5</sup>

- |                                    |                                 |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Women and poverty making        | 7. Women in power and decision- |
| 2. Education and training of women | 8. Institutional mechanisms     |
| 3. Women and health                | 9. Human rights of women        |
| 4. Violence against women          | 10. Women and the media         |
| 5. Women and armed conflict        | 11. Women and environment       |
| 6. Women and the economy           | 12. The girl child              |

Beijing on the Web: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/fwcw.htm>

Thanks to the world conferences on women, numerous NGOs assembled world-wide. This led to increased collaboration and dialogue. The contribution of the parallel NGO platform at the Beijing Conference for example can hardly be overrated. They left their mark on the content of the action platform and, as lobbies of national governments, play a vital role in the execution of the action platform.

Many NGOs form international networks. The list is too long to discuss.

For more international NGOs, please consult the website:

[http://www.unifem.org/links/listing\\_by\\_category.php?CategoryID=4](http://www.unifem.org/links/listing_by_category.php?CategoryID=4)

<http://www.womenaction.org>

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(Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> The Belgian information site of the UN (<http://www.runic-europe.org/nederlands/indexned.htm>) offers a complete and accessible survey of the functioning, structure and history of the UN in general. An organization chart of the United Nations can be found there too.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about International right law and international treaties, please consult: [http://www.unric.org/\\_International\\_Law.html](http://www.unric.org/_International_Law.html)

<sup>3</sup> The appointment of Miet Smet as State Secretary of social emancipation in 1985 was a direct consequence of this. As a result of this, Equal Opportunities became the first official policy in Belgium.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about the women conferences: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/session/presskit/hist.htm>

<sup>5</sup> UN factsheets on the 12 critical areas of concern <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/session/presskit/presskit.htm>