

**Ms. Ivanka Corti, Chairperson of the Committee on the Elimination of
Discrimination against Women 1993 to 1996**

**Statement at the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the Convention
on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
by the General Assembly of the United Nations**

13 October 2004, United Nations New York

Distinguished Participants,

Celebrating today the 25th anniversary of the adoption, by the General Assembly, of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women we appeal to the remaining States, members of the United Nations, to join the “community” of 178 States parties to the Convention so as to accomplish the goal that the international community has committed itself to at different United Nations Conferences: universal ratification of the Convention.

Celebrations of anniversaries are usually occasions to review results and achievements. The fact that the vast majority of the members of the United Nations in 25 years has become party to the Convention is a great achievement in itself if we consider that not many years ago, neither the United Nations system nor the world community knew much about the Convention and its monitoring body – the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Today, we can say with pride that the global women’s community knows all about the so-called “Women’s Convention”. A tremendous feat has been accomplished at all levels: at global, regional and national levels around the globe. What has happened and what has contributed to this universal acknowledgement of the Convention as a basic framework for the recognition and respect of women’s human rights? No doubt, a great contribution to the universal recognition was given, both to the Convention and the Committee by the four major United Nations Conferences – Vienna, Cairo, Copenhagen and Beijing – which took place during the last decade of the past century.

In this period, from 1993-1996, I had the privilege and honour to be the Chairperson of the CEDAW Committee.

Allow me to recall how the Committee went through these crucial events and opportunities, and the efforts it made to be recognized as a human rights treaty body and to make the Convention and its legally binding nature essential for the elimination of different kinds of discrimination women are victim of. Let me mention some of the problems the Committee was already facing prior to 1993, just before the historical Vienna Conference on Human Rights: limited working time; lack of resources; and separation from the ‘mainstream’ human rights programme of the United Nations in Geneva. The CEDAW Committee also did not have a permanent meeting place, as did other treaty bodies. It met every other year in Vienna and New York, respectively, but never in Geneva. We definitely moved to New York in 1994. In a certain way these facts contributed to its invisibility.

The CEDAW Committee became aware of the necessity to start with a new strategy and policy: on one side, improving its work by elaborating documents for World Conferences and insisting on the importance of the Convention for the development of women’s human

rights; and on the other, following the recommendations of Vienna Conference that “human rights of women should form an integral part of the United Nations human rights activities, including the promotion of all human rights instruments relating to women”, starting with the active cooperation with different United Nations bodies and NGOs from all continents.

The first step in this direction was the beginning of our participation in the sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women which today is a normal practice.

For the Vienna Conference, we prepared Suggestion No. 4 which was issued as an official document and several parts of the Vienna Declaration concerning women’s human rights were taken from this document (A/157/PC/62/Ass.13).

The examination of States parties’ reports continued in the spirit of the constructive dialogue. At the same time, we proceeded to the analysis of different articles of the Convention indicating specific steps that States parties should take to fulfil their obligations under the Convention and, in accordance with article 21, we issued General Recommendations. The very important General Recommendation No. 21 on nationality, legal capacity and family relations (art. 9, 15 and 16) was adopted during that year.

During the same year we adopted the practice to send concluding comments directly to the Governments, after the examination of the reports.

For subsequent UN Conferences, we regularly issued Suggestions referring to the subject of the Conference and underlining the importance of the correct implementation of the Convention, and identifying progress achieved and difficulties and obstacles encountered in reaching the goals. We always insisted on the serious problem of the reservations to the Convention and the necessity of their withdrawal.

The second strategy consisted of promoting the visibility of the work of the Committee as a human rights treaty body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the most important human rights treaty concerning half of the world’s population. In the realization of this strategy, we were helped by the decisions of the World Conferences which allowed us to make the Convention and the work of the Committee known to different levels of the United Nations system and particularly to the large NGO community which, in growing numbers, were all together important actors for the universal ratification and later on for the drafting and adoption of the Optional Protocol to the Convention.

The first active cooperation between the Committee and a UN entity was with UNESCO. Sponsored by UNESCO, four experts participated in Paris in the elaboration of a joint text having as basis article 10 of the Convention. This text was issued as a booklet and distributed in official languages of the United Nations during the Beijing Conference. The title was “Towards a gender-inclusive culture through education”. The official presentation took place during the Beijing Conference in the presence of the CEDAW Committee members, the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Director-General of UNESCO.

With UNFPA, our cooperation started with the sponsorship of a CEDAW presence at the Cairo Conference which enabled us not only to speak at this World Assembly, but also to have the opportunity to participate in many NGO gatherings and to engage new NGOs to work actively in their respective countries on the ratification and implementation of the Convention. This cooperation culminated later, on the initiative of CEDAW and with the

sponsorship of UNFPA, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Division for the Advancement of Women, in a meeting entitled “Roundtable on human rights approaches to women’s health, with a focus on sexual and reproductive health and rights”. It was the first meeting of representatives from all the human rights treaty bodies on a thematic issue. Besides the representatives of the treaty bodies, several NGOs participated as well as representatives of different universities dealing with women’s health problems.

The cooperation with UNIFEM became more active and fruitful and there is a long list of its activities on behalf of spreading knowledge on the importance of the Convention for de jure and de facto equality of women. Its programme to further enhance public awareness and use of the CEDAW Convention among programme advisors for women’s human rights contributed extensively to its strategy of empowerment through the Convention.

The decision to send a group of NGO representatives from the Asia-Pacific region to attend the 16th session for one week and prepare them to spread knowledge and advocacy for the Convention at the grass-root level, represents one of many very important actions of UNIFEM in support of CEDAW.

During the Committee’s regular session, there was not enough time to prepare a document on the accomplishments as well as challenges faced by it and which the Committee had to present to the Beijing Conference. At the same time, the Committee had to play an important role and make a positive contribution to the Conference.

We asked some Governments to help us and sponsor at least a one-week session. The Government of Spain accepted to sponsor a one week informal session which enabled us to prepare its well-known document. This meeting also opened the door for successive informal meetings of the Committee sponsored by some other Governments – States parties to the Convention.

In the meantime, aware that it was impossible to eliminate the backlog of reports awaiting consideration and undertaking other duties because of the lack of meeting time we proposed, in a Suggestion, an amendment to art. 20.1 of the Convention. The States parties meeting in May 1995 allowed the Chairperson to explain the reasons for such a request. The decision was positive, and the Committee was granted a second session per year on a temporary basis, until two-thirds of States parties accept the amendment at which point it will enter into force.

Suffice it to say that the active participation and contribution of the members of the Committee at the Beijing Conference was appreciated. Some served as experts members of official delegations and others actively participated in the Huairou Forum. Ten experts had the opportunity to participate in the Forum thanks to financial support of UNIFEM and IWRAW.

After the Beijing Conference, the Platform for Action giving practically to CEDAW the task of monitoring it, we updated the guidelines for reporting.

The Committee adopted its suggestions for a draft Optional Protocol. These served as background paper of the first CSW working group on the Optional Protocol.

The contribution of NGOs was critical in the campaign for universal ratification, the correct implementation, withdrawal of reservations, advocacy on the value of the Convention as a legal instrument, and for the drafting and adoption of the Optional Protocol. Our “historical friends” IWRAW and International Human Rights Law Group and many, many others who joined them during the years at international or national levels were a precious help for the achievements of the CEDAW Committee. For several years we worked with them on a “spontaneous basis”, in the absence of a particular article regulating this cooperation. The formalisation came later with the decision of the Committee.

UNICEF sponsored the first official meeting of CEDAW and the Committee on the Rights of the Child in Cairo. The meeting allowed the two treaty bodies to exchange opinions about the methods of work and obstacles both find in the implementation of their respective Conventions. This visit was also the beginning of the active cooperation with UNICEF.

While I was Chairperson of the Committee, the tragedy in the former Yugoslavia occurred and women were victims of massive rape and other forms of violence in the territories in war. Within the limits of our mandate we denounced these massive violations of women’s human rights and asked parties involved in the war to send their reports on an exceptional basis, referring to General Recommendation No. 19 on violence against women.

We did the same when the tragedy in Rwanda happened. We denounced also the religious fundamentalism in Afghanistan which deprived women of their fundamental human rights to education, work and freedom of movement. We tried to be *present* at all occasions where women’s human rights were put in danger.

The seven minutes allowed do not permit to give detailed information on four years of the Committee when such important world events happened. But the opportunities were exceptional and a lot has been done. Fortunately the Committee has always been helped by the personal commitment and professionalism of its experts and many important improvements have been registered also in the following years.

Thanking warmly the organizers of this celebration and congratulating them again for the excellent idea to remember these 25 important years for women all over the world, I firmly believe that this event will serve as impetus for constantly better results for the respect of women’s human rights through the implementation of the Convention.

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