



**THEY CAN MOVE US BUT THEY CAN'T STOP US:
Surviving the Early Years of “Women and Development”
in the United Nations**

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THEY CAN MOVE US BUT THEY CAN'T STOP US: Surviving the Early Years of "Women and Development" in the United Nations

Introduction

"Everything we do includes both men and women. We don't have programmes exclusively for men or for women," the representative of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) explained. That was true. It was also true that there were few women enrolled in their programmes. Something had to be done. The Chief of the Social Development Division of ECA did it. He created a Women's Programme that would evolve to become the African Training and Research Centre for Women (ATRCW); he invited a Swedish visitor to persuade her government to provide ECA with two new senior posts for the Women's Programme.

This is the story of establishing ATRCW, the world's first United Nations regional Women's Programme, the obstacles faced in doing it, and how that experience was brought to creating the UN's global women's fund, UNIFEM. It was a time (the early 1970s) when a fledgling global women's movement inspired women working in the development cooperation ministries of their donor governments to partner with women in developing countries to ensure that women in those countries would get a fair share of the financial and other resources provided. In the past, that had not happened.

It was also a time when women were not yet seen as the farmers, merchants and entrepreneurs they actually were (and still are) and whose productivity was (and still is) a critical support to millions of families in developing countries. They were seldom employed as senior professionals and civil servants.

When I arrived in Addis Ababa to fill one of the Sweden-sponsored posts – Daria Tasha of Tanzania would fill the other – just 7% of staff in the entire Commission were women. Yet among the responsibilities of the Social Development Division, one was to support the implementation of resolutions of Africa-regional conferences relating to women. That would be our task. The African Training and Research Centre for Women (ATRCW) would evolve from a small Women's Programme.

I had my first encounters with "women's place" early on. When briefing a United Nations executive on our work with women, I started to explain the conceptual framework for our activities. That provoked a startling comment: "You women are not supposed to conceptualize," he said. A colleague observed:

"There is an evident intellectual inability to cope with women's issues" (Ferree and Tripp 46).

Later some staff of the ECA, including its Executive Secretary at the time, strategized to remove the ATRCW entirely from its home in the ECA and from the United Nations itself, and "give it autonomy" in a far-away country. Nigeria was proposed as the potential host country. We were not flattered. Our woman lawyer proposed our strategy to fight against this move, arguing that the African Union – the association of African States – already had plans for such a Centre, and of course ECA would not wish to compete with its region's top political organization.

Women observed that "the myth of the male breadwinner" posed a major obstacle to women receiving an equitable share of resources. The idea was that men deserved assistance because "it is men who support families" prevailed among both men and women despite women's obvious contributions from sale of their produce, their provision of school fees and many other resources, along with their social contributions.

In addition, women themselves too often had a micro-resource mentality – they would hesitate to request resources adequate to their needs. Overall, "the centrality of women to their nations' economic and social growth was, for many years, neither fully understood nor acted upon" (Ferree and Tripp 96).

Since African women were not seen as the farmers, merchants and entrepreneurs they actually were (and still are), their productivity was not fully acknowledged, nor were their qualifications appreciated, so they did not get access to scientific and technological resources. Nor did they get posts at ECA. In short, there was a failure to realize that the most serious problems of development defy solution without the involvement of women. That situation finally changed when the Women's Programme succeeded in convincing ECA officials that women are a development issue and development is a women's issue (Snyder 2014. 164).

A member of the External Review Mission that visited ATRCW in 1978 summed up the underlying issues

"The problem, I fear, is that the Centre has quietly and almost entirely on its own resources, gone about its business rather more effectively than its fraternal partners in other divisions. The 'ladies' (as the Centre was called by one high ECA official) are a rather successful bundle of energy and drive who sometimes appear to threaten less-progressive elements of the ECA bureaucracy" (Snyder 1995. 112).

In fact, ATRCW's greatest strength was its location at the heart of UNECA. It could thus speak with authority not as an NGO or a women's study group. It could cite the backing of ECA's Member States and speak in the name of the United Nations. Those were the sources of its strong credibility. And they explain why ATRCW would become the model for other world regional programmes.

ECA/ATRCW would participate with great pride at the first ever global women's meeting, the International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City in 1975.

International Women's Year: the Mexico City Conference

Delegates at the first global women's conference in Mexico City, 1975, devised a 2-pronged approach to financing activities for women. First, to challenge existing funds, foundations and agencies were to make large scale efforts to ensure that high priority was placed on giving women the skills, training and other opportunities they needed to participate fully and effectively in the total development effort. Second, they proposed to create new women-specific institutions that would ensure a long life for the movement they were creating.

A New Fund for the Decade for Women, 1976-1985

Delegates resolved to create a special fund for the Decade for Women, 1976-1985, from the remaining conference money. The Voluntary Fund for the Decade for Women (VFDW, later called UNIFEM) was born. The U.K. delegate offered to contribute 200 British pounds each year for three years "to help women in the poorest countries and specifically rural women." Iran offered an additional 500 pounds. ECA's ATRCW became the model for the Asia/Pacific, Latin America and Western Asia regions.

I was asked to move from Addis Ababa to UN headquarters in New York to help to set up that new fund, which would come to be known as UNIFEM. My accommodation at UN headquarters was a tiny office with space for one desk and two chairs. Its window offered a clear view of the brick wall of the US Mission to the UN, about six feet away. I was given a secretary and, on my request, a finance officer.

Colleagues and I wrote policies and procedures for VFDW, to be reviewed by the Fund's Consultative Committee whose five members were elected from each of the world's major regions. These application instruments were forwarded to the UN Development Programme (UNDP) offices worldwide so that women in developing countries could apply for support to their activities.

I would soon experience obstacles to operations that were posed by our office location in the United Nations bureaucracy and the nearby offices of its governing Member States. The following two cases illustrate the impact of those obstacles on the Fund's operations.

Guilt by Association: the Copenhagen Conference

The Copenhagen Conference was convened to assess the progress of implementing the Mexico City Plan of Action. The World Programme of Action for the second half of the decade, drafted at Copenhagen, called on all development cooperation organizations – none of which were named specifically – to provide assistance in consultation or cooperation with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the representative of the Palestine people (Snyder 59). “No connection was made between VFDW and the PLO. VFDW was widely praised at the Conference for its work with rural and poor urban women, as one of the ‘brightest spots on the UN horizon’” (Snyder 1995. 59).

Yet, a United States Assistant Secretary of State said there would be a 50% cut in the US contribution to VFDW: “The US may have to take abuse in the UN, but we don't have to pay for it” (Snyder 1995. 59). Incorrect information about VFDW prevailed among some delegates despite the fact that VFDW gave no money to support the Conference. USAID did contribute to it, however. Clearly, that US delegate did not comprehend the variety and diversity of programmes for women in the UN system.

It was guilt by association. The US grant to VFDW was finally restored but only at half the original level. “The momentum of VFDW was shattered,” it was said (Snyder 1995. 61). But UNIFEM soon recovered.

The Battle of Vienna

The question of where VFDW administrators should be located was a decision between New York and Vienna. If the fund was for research, it needed the initial support of the Commission on the Status of Women, and it should be with the Center for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs (CSDHA) in Vienna. If it was a technical cooperation fund, it needed the support of other funds such as UNDP, UNICEF and UNFPA whose headquarters were in New York. That association had implications for the costs and the efficiency of the Fund. A complicating factor was that the Government of Austria had constructed the Vienna International Centre and needed to fill its offices. Of note also is that the UN's Secretary General at the time was Austria's Kurt Waldheim.

The Consultative Committee hired an outside consultant to study the issues and offer a resolution to the location dilemma. Luckily for him, our small secretariat was already studying issues and trends for its reports. In the four years of its existence several trends had emerged. There were requests for assistance to women in urban slums, to refugees, to cooperatives, for technologies and to provide revolving credit funds. The consultant found that other UN funds were not benefiting women directly, so there was an important role for VFDW, and the quantity of requests received meant the need for more substantive and administrative support. In short, the VFDW was to respond to practical needs of women in developing countries. That was not a CSDHA function.

Conclusions

Obstacles did not cease within the secretariat. A most difficult one arose when, over a weekend when I was on a fundraising mission in Tokyo, our offices were, unexpectedly and without warning moved to another building, scattering documents along the way.

The new crowded space had no telephones. The space from which we were so abruptly removed remained vacant for more than a year. Colleagues from the International Women's Tribune Centre, an NGO near the UN, created a poster: "They can move us but they can't stop us."

Analysts say that Austria lessened its pressure to move the Fund to Vienna in favor of asking delegates to support a 3rd term for its national as Secretary General. The General Assembly debated the purposes of the Fund, which would determine its location. New York was decided. And on recommendation of the Consultative Committee, the Under Secretary created new posts to help ease the workload. He also increased our authority since the Vienna office was no longer involved in our work.

Through all of the administrative issues, we were reminded that working to empower the poorest women was threatening to some high level and powerful people. They could move us, but they couldn't stop us.

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About the Author



Margaret (Peg) Snyder, PhD is Founding Director of UNIFEM (1978-89), co-founder of the African Centre for Women and head of the Voluntary Agencies Bureau of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (1971-78), as well as a co-founder of Women's World Banking. She was an international election observer in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Tanzania and a Fulbright Scholar at Makerere University, Uganda (1990s); her PhD is from the University Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. She is co-founder and Vice President Emeritus of the Board of the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund and former Treasurer of the Green Belt Movement International. Her books include *Transforming Development: Women, Poverty and Politics* (a history of UNIFEM), *African Women and Development: A History* (co-authored with Mary Tadesse), *Women in African Economies: from Burning Sun to Boardroom* and *Above the Odds: a Decade of Change for Ugandan Women Entrepreneurs* (with Sarah Kitakule); she has written chapters in other books. (Photo courtesy Margaret Snyder)

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