

# The UN CSW and Zonta International

This is the story of how our organization, Zonta International, took a leading role in advancing the status of women and girls worldwide.

It was 1945. World War II had ended, and there was a meeting of 51 countries in San Francisco (April 25-June 26) to establish a United Nations - a body which could negotiate and end international conflicts. **Jessie Ekins from Ontario Canada** was the Zonta International President at that time, and because of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the theme for the biennium became "Building our Defenses in the Atomic Age." Ekins saw an opportunity for Zonta's growth at the end of the war and also supported the delegation of two Zontains to the first opening session of the UN General Assembly, held in London on January 10, 1946, followed by the second session in Flushing Meadows NY in October.

At this time, the UN Charter was negotiated, and one of the 5 main bodies became the **Economic and Social Council**, which is the body through which non-profit organizations work with the UN. At that time, ECOSOC, as it is called, divided its work into various Commissions, and the Commission on Human Rights was tasked with taking up the rights of women. It soon became apparent that there was so much work in that area (for example, only 25 of the 51 countries in the UN allowed women the right to vote) that the chair (Bodil Begtrup of Denmark) of the sub-commission on women's rights devoted to this task, soon approached ECOSOC to establish a separate Commission - a Commission on the Status of Women - and it was approved on **June 21, 1946**.

The first meeting of the Commission (CSW) was held in **1947 at Lake Success NY** - perhaps selected for its name! 15 members came together along with a number of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) who worked side by side to address the many issues affecting women. I can't document Zonta's presence at that first meeting, but it would not surprise me if Zonta was there!

Subsequent International Presidents voiced their concern for world peace, as well as for the UN. In **1950 Dr. Elizabeth Gist Dozier, charter member of the Zonta Club of San Fernando Valley in California US**, became Zonta International President. She had been one of the delegates to the first

opening session of the UN. She stressed international friendship and the need to bring more young women into political action and the professions.

Meanwhile, the CSW met every two years, emphasizing the legal aspects of the status of women worldwide. Zonta, which had become “International” with the election of Helen Cleveland from Toronto Canada in 1930, began organizing clubs in more countries. It was in 1968 that Zonta elected its first International President outside North America - Helvi Sipila from Helsinki Finland. But it wasn't until 1972 when PIP Leota Pekrul (1970-72) from Denver CO was instrumental in establishing the first UN Committee and continued as its first chair.

Zonta had formalized its relationship to ECOSOC by applying for and receiving Roster Status in 1963. Zonta had been involved with the UN and its various commissions, especially the CSW, since the beginning of the UN. Because of its leadership and commitment, Zonta's status was increased to Category 2 (now called Special) in 1969, and further to Category 1 (General) in 1985. At the time there were only 34 of 481 NGOs in Category 1 status, and even with the enormous increase in NGOs working with the UN since then, Zonta retains the highest status at the UN. This status gave Zonta the opportunity to speak out on issues and to recommend agenda items for consideration throughout the UN System. It also gave Zonta access at the highest levels, and Zontains in various countries have served in official capacity on their national delegations and even as UN Staff.

One such Zontain was Helvi Sipila. She was an attorney and Finnish diplomat, representing Finland at the General Assembly and also as a member and also chair of the CSW (1967). She later became the highest-ranking woman at the UN in 1972, holding the title of Assistant Secretary General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs.

As you may know, she had also been Zonta International President in 1968, so her dual role was greatly influential to Zonta's participation in the development of women's rights at the UN.

The UN in 1972 declared International Women's Day as March 8, and Zonta began celebrating that day as Zonta Rose Day. In keeping with Zonta's original goal of international friendship and peace, many clubs and members share yellow roses to enhance this message.

But the story of Zonta and the CSW goes on, becoming even stronger in the years that followed. It was **Helvi Sipila**, PIP from Helsinki FI (1968-70) who really positioned Zonta as a force for women and girls' rights at the UN CSW.

Today the CSW is a government body of 45 member states of the UN, with representation from all 5 regions. It met only every other year until the late 1960s, concentrating on legal rights and working on such issues as human rights, marital rights, age of marriage, and working with other UN bodies such as ILO on equal pay for equal work. It played a key role in developing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and the Declaration of the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1967. But with the declaration in 1972 of 1975 as International Women's Year, and 1975-85 as the UN Decade for Women, the Commission began meeting annually and became active in planning for the entire decade - and the 4 UN World Conferences on Women took center stage.

In 1975 **Helvi Sipila** became the Secretary General for the First UN World Conference on Women held in Mexico City and continued to play a leading role in every one of the Conferences that followed.

In 1985 the Second UN World Conference on Women was held in Copenhagen Denmark. The Danish Club worked to enhance the Conference with a reception at the Dansk Bank headquarters and other events, in addition to their participation as support to the Zonta delegation. The Conference continued the work started previously.

Another Zontian - **Leticia Shahani** from the Philippines, became the Secretary General for the Third UN World Conference on Women held in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985. That Conference produced the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies, which evolved into the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and its 12 critical areas of concern](#). These were developed and endorsed by the 189 countries attending the Fourth UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing China in 1995.

At each conference NGO participation continued to grow, and Zonta fast became a major player in the international women's movement.

**PIP Helvi Sipila**, the highest-ranking woman at the UN at that time, was able to share the commitment of all Zontains as she steered the outcomes of the first Conference to address the multitude of issues confronting women. This led to the founding of UNIFEM (the UN Women's Fund) and INSTRAW (research on issues confronting women) called for at the First UN World Conference on Women. NGO representatives met together and formed

additional organizations, such as Women's World Banking started by Michaela Walsh, now a member of Zonta Brooklyn, and Project 5-0, a collaboration of 5 international women's organizations, of which Zonta was one.

Zonta was one of the first NGOs to support UNIFEM and its programs, and **Peg Snyder, UNIFEM's first executive director** was named a Zonta International Honorary Member in 1988. Zonta also later recognized as an honorary member **Noeleen Heyzer** who followed Snyder at UNIFEM. UNIFEM, INSTRAW and 2 other areas of the UN that *supported* the work of the CSW were later combined into one agency - UN Women - in 2010.

During this time the General Assembly urged the CSW to draft [CEDAW](#) – the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The First World Conference had called for such a Convention, with effective procedures for its implementation. The Convention was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and came into force on September 3, 1981. The US is the only industrialized country that has not ratified CEDAW, but a new global movement has sprung up – Cities for CEDAW – to encourage local implementation of the CEDAW principles.

Zonta was very active at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women, both at the Conference itself held in Beijing, and at the Forum held in Huairou. International President Chief Folake Solanke headed a Zonta delegation and developed a number of discussions, all well-attended. Since that time Zontians have worked through their Clubs and Districts to implement, with their governments, the [12 Critical Areas of Concern](#) found in the Platform.

The CSW is charged with implementation and follow up to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Its work since 1972 has been primarily to implement the 4 World Conferences. Every year following 1995 it is charged to review and appraise the progress made throughout the world in respect to the Beijing Platform for Action. CSW has additionally recognized the need to address emerging issues, such as AI. Every 5 years there is an overall review of the Platform. The CSW submits its agreed conclusions each year to ECOSOC.

In 2000 the UN held a special session of the General Assembly in celebration of the 5th anniversary of the Beijing Conference. This year the UN General Assembly will celebrate the 30th anniversary in September.

Meeting in March each year, NGOs and many members of Zonta arrive in New York City to follow the work of the CSW and to make their voices heard.

In addition to the government meetings of the CSW, an **NGO Forum is held parallel to the discussions and events being held inside the UN**. As participation by NGOS in the UN Headquarters building itself is restricted, only 20 delegates from Zonta, selected by the Zonta International President, secure badges to attend certain meetings and events held inside UN Headquarters. However, most official meetings are broadcast on WebTV and Zontians everywhere can observe these meetings remotely.

Another benefit to attending also lies with the NGO Forum, which is free and open to thousands of people worldwide. There are official events, called special events, held inside the UN Headquarters in New York, which require a UN badge to attend. Some of these events have additional tickets issued by the sponsor that you can secure to attend. Parallel events, however, are free and open to all who have registered for the free NGO Forum.

The NGO Forum was held in Huairou China in 1995 alongside the Beijing delegate meetings. That Forum, along with the Fora from the previous Conferences, became the model for today's NGO Forum. Today parallel events are usually held both on-line and in-person. Attending in-person provides an opportunity to network, find great speakers for Zonta sponsored events, learn more about the world and about the UN. Most rewarding is the chance to meet other Zonta members, often from other areas of the world. Our own **UN Committee Chair, Pamela Morgan, is co-chair of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women in NY and heads the Forum**.

Your participation is key to the success of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. This year marks the **30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action with a special session of the UN General Assembly scheduled for September 22**.

You can bring the story of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to your districts and clubs by securing a [Proclamation](#) from elected officials in your community and publicizing it. You might also want to hold a special event, emphasizing one or more of the critical areas of concern described in the Platform for Action.

Zonta is also a member of the US Women's Caucus, which has published on its website [shadow reports](#) for the 12 Critical Areas of Concern. This was especially needed because the US did not file a progress report with UN Women. For those of you from Canada, there is a Canadian submission by your government on the UN Women's website. Also, on the UN Women's

website you can find a link to the original text of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and to the 12 Critical Areas of Concern.

I know this is a lot of information, but please act NOW. Our voices need to be heard.

Progress in our members' countries is threatened. The US refused to endorse the document at CSW 69 in March, and we have already begun to see threats and risks to the progress for women made in the US. Canada will also have areas of concern. US cuts to funding for the UN, its agencies and programs which are so important to our organization, threaten the UN's existence as well as the well-being of many people in the world. Already there is discussion about moving much of the UN's work to another country where visa applications may be more favorably decided.

In addition, there is discussion underway among the CSW member states about **revitalization of the CSW**. This is being led by the president of ECOSOC and Ireland and St. Kitts and Nevis are chairing the negotiations. How this will be negotiated, approved and implemented is yet to be decided.

The **CSW will meet in NYC March 9-20, 2026**. Your participation can hold historical significance. Join with other members of Zonta throughout the world as we celebrate the 70th session of the CSW, bringing strength to the global movement for women and girls. And remember that March 8 is International Women's Day and Zonta Rose Day. It's no surprise that Zonta chose that day as one to celebrate friendship worldwide.

*Prepared by Leslie Erway Wright, Zonta International UN Committee 2024-26, District 3 Advocacy co-chair*

See also: <https://www.zonta.org/images/docs/AboutUs/Zonta%20100%20Years/Appendix-16-Zonta-International-and-the-UN.pdf>