

## **CoNGO Event – United Nations 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary May 7, 2015**

**President ECOSOC, Martin Sajdik**

**Director ECOSOC , Navid Hanif**

**President CoNGO, Cyril Ritchie**

**Marc Jourdan, Global Foundation for Democracy and Development**

**Elizabeth Benham, Past President International Federation of Business and Professional Women**

**It is indeed an honor to be an NGO voice on this panel today.**

**Mr President ,**

**Allow me to present a “vivid “case study of shared ideals and shared values.**

### **Honoring the Past:**

The year is 1919 and the United States National Federation of Business and Professional Women (known as BPW) was established by a visionary woman Dr Lena Madestin Phillips from Kentucky. 10 years later in 1930 the International Federation of Business and Professional Women also known as IFBPW was launched and thus began the organization’s long history and advocacy efforts in the process of the formation of the League of Nations and in supporting the establishment of the United Nations with the engagement of our member and champion, Esther Wanner Hymer. From 1932-1940 as the chairperson of the education committee of the Cause and Cure of War Committee along with Eleanor Roosevelt, Esther Hymer organized over 4000 roundtables over a

period of 6 years across the USA and In 1945 was present at the founding of the United Nations conference after working steadily in the lead up to it.

It was there that Esther became aware of the potential value of NGO's and the meaningful role in helping to influence policies. In the charter of the United Nations it was provided that the Economic and Social Council "may make special arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence" Therefore IFBPW sprang into action and made its request for consultative status along with 32 organizations which was granted by ECOSOC in 1947.

The granting of "Consultative Status" was an innovation and a formal recognition that non-governmental organizations have a vital part to play within the UN system.

Esther Hymer went on to lobby for setting up the Commission on Status of Women (CSW) which she defined as being the forum to consider: questions of political equality including the right to vote and to hold office, civil rights, the prevention or eradication of discrimination against women among others. The CSW became the principle channel for exchange of information and representation on women's issues. At the first general assembly of the United Nations in London in 1946, a delegate, Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt raised the issue that it lacked women, since out of the 51 countries represented only 11 gave women delegate status. In the assembly Eleanor Roosevelt read the open letter

addressing this to the women of the world, thus inspiring women's organizations' into action. Our British Business and Professional Women's Federation called for a round table conference of women's organizations. The conference decided to ask for a commission to consider how best to implement the equality clauses in the United Nations Charter. As a result, a petition was presented to Sir Ramaswami Mudaliar, Chairman of ECOSOC, for the establishment of a special body. This was granted and a sub-commission on the Status of Women was set up and held its first session on 10th February, 1947.

Dorothy Hall, Secretary of the British BPW Federation reported:

*"For the first time in the history of the women of the world they had an international body, solely devoted to achieving complete equality between the sexes, in political, social, economic and educational life - in effect to raising the status of women everywhere."*

The importance of the work of this sub-commission became so outstanding that within a year it had become a full and permanent Commission of the United Nations.

The IFBPW used its right to submit numerous statements to the sessions and by the second decade of the Commission on the Status of Women it became a well-recognized fact that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had assimilated their role within the

UN system and were making contributions to the sessions. By 1952 there were over 100 NGOs with consultative status.

### **Moving Forward:**

1972 was indeed an historic year. For the first time, a woman was appointed Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations. Her name was Helvi Sipilä, a longtime member of BPW Finland. A respected Finnish lawyer and judge, she had represented her country at the UN General Assembly session since 1966.

Prior to her appointment as Assistant Secretary-General in 1972, she served as Chairperson of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

Esther Hymer was elected Chairperson of the NGO Committee of the International Women's Year serving from 1972 to 1982. The International Women's Year was set for 1975 and Mexico City was the location for both the official conference of government delegates and an NGO forum which met simultaneously.

Fifty-two international organizations attached to the UN were among the 6,000 registered participants. In her new role of Secretary-General at International Women's Year, Helvi Sipilä wrote: *'Meeting in Mexico is about an historic incident in the evolution of women's struggle against oppression. It is also the story of the United Nations at work in its 30th anniversary year.'*

The NGO committee on the Decade of Women, also chaired by Esther Hymer, planned the NGO forum. The committee consisted of eighty-five members from NGOs and was responsible for preparatory meetings on every continent to stimulate implementation of the goals of the International Women's Decade, which were - equality, development and peace. The committee also held international seminars and raised funds to bring women from all over the world to the UN.

In July 1985 over 10,000 women, seated, standing and sitting in the aisles attended the World Conference in Nairobi to “Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations for Women: Equality, Development and Peace”. This was the third major world conference devoted exclusively to women and it was planned to take stock of the ten year efforts of the United Nations and its member states to improve the status of women and also to devise strategies to take forward to the year 2000.

Taking part were 695 official observers from 160 non-governmental organizations and 2020 government delegates representing 158 member states of the United Nations.

Two years after the Nairobi conference in 1987, IFBPW was designated to be honored by the then UN Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, as a 'Peace Messenger' who said this was *'in recognition of a significant contribution to the programme and objectives of the International Year of Peace.'*

Esther Hymer, whose work had without doubt attracted this recognition, received the special Peace Messenger Certificate on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1987.

The NGO Forum on Women '95, took place in conjunction with the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. It was one of the largest global conferences ever held, with some 17,000 participants, including 6000 delegates from 189 countries, over 4000 representatives of accredited non-governmental organizations, a host of international civil servants and about 4000 media representatives

The whole process leading up to Beijing had been structured on expert groups, committees and regional preparatory conferences examining the issues within a framework of twelve critical issues of concern relating to women: Poverty; Education; Health; Violence; Armed Conflict; the Economy; Decision-Making and Leadership; Gender Equality; Human Rights; the Media; the Environment; and the Girl Child. The outcome was the 361 paragraph document, the 'Platform for Action' and the Beijing Declaration as an agenda for action for women's empowerment. It was adopted by the conference as the working document for the future, placing a heavy responsibility on the organizations within the United Nations system to play a key role in the follow up, implementation and monitoring.

The 1997 CSW meeting was a very special one as it was the 50th Anniversary of the Commission's work. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said in his address:

*"The Commission has been a catalyst for women's equality. It has played a crucial role in monitoring progress in the advancement of women and in holding governments accountable for their actions. It is a place where all women have a voice in shaping the policies of the international policy".*

Then Mr Annan honoured Esther Hymer. In thanking her for her contribution he said, *"Still active in promoting women's equality, Mrs Hymer represents the best tradition of NGO activism in the United Nations."*

IFBPW continued to work closely with the United Nations, INSTRAW, UNIFEM, UNESCO, CEDAW the ILO and WHO, presented many statements and supported all actions recommended to empowering the status of women in all countries. It's work was focused on women in power and decision making and the economy.

### **The Present:**

IFBPW continues its close work with the United Nations system and the CSW. Our UN representatives in New York, Geneva, Paris and Vienna are fully engaged with many specialized agencies and also as members of the CoNGO substantive committees, active in the MDG's, the SDG's, and the post 2015 agenda. Through our support of the

“Women’s Empowerment Principles- Equality means Business” with the UN Global Compact and UN women our affiliates in 100 countries have been mobilized around the Seven (7) principles of Leadership, Equal Opportunities, Health, Education, Enterprise Supply Chain and Marketing, Equality through Advocacy, Measuring and Reporting. Our worldwide “Equal Pay Day “ Campaign now in its 7<sup>th</sup> year focuses on equal pay for work of equal value and has gained much success in raising the visibility on this important issue. Our ongoing work on the Convention to End all Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) continues with the current “Cities for CEDAW “campaign and Gender Equality in the workplace, marketplace and the communities in which we live.

### **The Future:**

Our linkage as an NGO with the United Nations for these past 68 years is a critical component of our advocacy work and remains a vital platform to influence policies. This work lies at the core of our goals to finally reach global equality and the empowerment of women on the social, political and economic levels. These goals are fully shared by UN Women and one day we will together reach that promised land of equality for all.

### **In Conclusion:**

Our gathering today to celebrate 70 years of the United Nations is momentous. And even more momentous if it demonstrates even more tangibly, and visibly, the crucial role of



NGOs at the UN. With unified voices of NGOs, their vigilant attention to peoples voices on the ground , and with their robust presence at the UN, they continue to advocate for a new multilaterism where civil society is not an appendage but a key pillar of just and participatory decision making. This was the witness of Esther Hymer, of IFBPW, of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, which she led from its beginnings, and CoNGO with it's over 30 substantive committees for the last 67 years.

Long live the United Nations!

Thank you for your attention

Elizabeth Benham  
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