

# FORWARD-LOOKING STRATEGIES: THE UN WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN

*Maureen O'Neil*

The adoption of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (FLS), in July 1985 at the United Nations World Conference on Women in Nairobi, is an important achievement for women of the world. The strategies provide a blueprint for action to advance the status of women in national and international economic, social, cultural and legal development. Within this framework, governments are encouraged to move beyond the traditional view that the advancement of women simply means completing the checklist of 'women's issues,' and towards the view that the full participation and integration of women in all areas of society is crucial.

The FLS is significant because it was adopted with the consensus of all governments present. This consensus is an acknowledgement that women around the world share common concerns; it is a commitment on the part of governments to pursue the advancement of women over the next fifteen years in their own countries and on a global scale. Governments are committed to report periodically on the progress achieved in the implementation of the FLS.

The Forward-Looking Strategies document, while addressed first of all to Member States, international institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), makes a specific appeal to all women and men around the world to use the Strategies and encourage their implementation.

The Forward-Looking Strategies can play an important role in changing the status of women in society. As with all international non-treaty agreements, implementation of the FLS will depend wholly on the will of national governments and on the vigilance of women to ensure that governments fulfill their commitments.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE FORWARD-LOOKING STRATEGIES

As early as 1983, preparations were underway for the Nairobi World Confer-

ence on Women. The United Nations distributed an extensive questionnaire to its Member States to review and assess the achievements of the Decade for Women. Governments were asked to respond to a series of questions designed to show how the situation of women had changed over the past ten years in many areas, such as technology, health, education, industry and trade. Based on the results of this questionnaire, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, the preparatory committee for the Nairobi Conference, drafted a set of strategies to overcome obstacles to the advancement of women to the year 2000. During the preparatory meetings held prior to the Nairobi Conference, attempts were made to find the areas of agreement on Strategies. Agreement in principle was reached on two-thirds of the document prior to the Conference.

At the Nairobi World Conference delegates worked in committee to review the Forward-Looking Strategies on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis. During the final two days of the plenary session the Conference worked through the reports of the committees, quickly adopting those paragraphs that the committees had approved and leaving more time for nego-

tiations on matters yet to be resolved. In the final hours of the Conference, wording was resolved on controversial references in several paragraphs to Zionism, Palestinian refugees, apartheid and difficult world economic questions. After hours of intense negotiations, the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies document as a whole was adopted by consensus.

Both prior to and during the Conference, Canada played a significant role in developing the Forward-Looking Strategies. Before the Conference, as a member of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, Canada worked on the drafting and revision process. Canada also acted as the coordinator of the Western group of nations both before and during the Conference, coordinating the positions of the United States, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Japan, and representing these positions in negotiations with the Eastern European countries and the group of Third World nations.

## THEMES OF THE FORWARD-LOOKING STRATEGIES

The Forward-Looking Strategies are clearly the result of a decade of thought on



*UN End of Decade for Women Conference*

*Credit: Sylvia Spring*



Maureen O'Neil (left) and Walter F. McLean, Minister Responsible for the Status of Women Canada  
Credit: Sylvia Spring

the status of women. They highlight the close relationship between the three goals of the UN Decade for Women (1976-1985) – Equality, Development and Peace – and show that the full participation of women in development and in the strengthening of peace, as well as the promotion of equality between women and men, are mutually reinforcing goals. In turn, the Strategies show how the achievement of these requires specific measures to be taken in all areas, especially employment, health and education (the sub-themes of the Decade for Women).

The FLS is obviously a document of the 1980s: it reflects a greater awareness of the ways in which global issues affect the lives of women. By returning again and again to questions of the 'structural imbalance' in trade and to the 'debt crisis,' the FLS highlights both the unequal economic relations between states and between the sexes. The FLS further incorporates an understanding that economic development does not automatically benefit women and that the absence of war does not guarantee peace for women.

Each of the five chapters of the FLS – equality, development, peace, areas of special concern, and international and regional co-operation – follow a similar pattern which identifies the *obstacles* to progress, *basic strategies* to overcome these obstacles, and a range of *specific measures* to implement the strategies. The document clearly demonstrates the evolution in thinking about measures to equalize

the status of women and men over the past decade. The FLS also breaks new ground in calling for strategies that address the impact on women of policies in energy, transportation, housing, access to water and the environment.

Over the decade, and in the Forward-Looking Strategies document, several themes are heard over and over again: the role of women in the economy, the participation of women in high-level decision-making, and the importance of the involvement of women in working for peace are broad areas in which advancement of the status of women is needed. Obstacles which impede this progress are identified in the FLS as: attitudes and images that promote the notion that women are inferior to men; the special requirements of women are to their child-bearing role; lack of knowledge about the potential of women and the means to encourage the development of that potential; and lack of resources given to advance the status of women. Each of the themes identified and the measures proposed are linked to the objectives of the decade – equality, development and peace.

Women's economic independence is the first of these. New measures which will influence women's economic situation are identified throughout the Forward-Looking Strategies. The effective participation of women in the economy implies the need not only for the actual expansion of employment for women and the recognition that women constitute a

significant proportion of producers, but also for social adjustments to ease women's burdens with respect to child and household care. With this in mind the Forward-Looking Strategies call on national governments:

- to identify the impact that unemployment has on women;
- to provide employment equity programs;
- to provide equal access to all jobs and training for women;
- to improve the conditions and structure of the formal and informal labour markets;
- to recognize and encourage the small business initiatives of women;
- to provide and encourage the establishment of child-care facilities; and,
- to encourage, through education and public information, the sharing of responsibilities for child and domestic care between women and men.

Clearly related to the theme of women in the economy is the role of technological change in women's lives. New technology can free women from time-consuming tasks, but it also can result in women losing their jobs. To ensure that women are able to benefit fully from technological change, the FLS encourages national governments to see women both as those who use technology and those who can change technology by providing women with access to education, training, jobs and decision-making; governments are also encouraged to assess the impact that technology will have on all aspects of women's lives.

A second theme of the Forward-Looking Strategies is the relationship between women and power. The notion that women's participation in high-level decision-making is essential, not only for their own advancement but also for the achievement of overall societal goals, is found in all sections of the FLS. The paucity of women in national and local decision-making bodies restricts the pursuit of women's interests and concerns. Exclusion of women from policy decisions has resulted in decisions that do not respond to women's needs and do not recognize women's work. The Forward-Looking Strategies call on governments to increase the number of women at all levels of decision-making and to provide the training and opportunities for their advancement.

The importance of women's involvement in working for peace both nationally and internationally is a third theme of the FLS. National governments are called upon to ensure that women participate in international negotiations and delegations and that ideas of peace are promoted in all formal and non-formal education systems, in the media and in communications systems. The Forward-Looking Strategies also links the achievement of peace with the elimination of violence against women. The International Year of Peace in 1986 provides a special opportunity to re-emphasize the pivotal role that women play in the achievement of peace and security.

#### FORWARD-LOOKING STRATEGIES TO THE YEAR 2000

Much work will have to be done by governments, women's groups, politicians, academics, the media, and individual women and men to ensure that the vision underlying the Forward-Looking Strategies becomes a reality for women around the world.

Canada has begun the process of implementing the FLS. Initially, efforts are being made to distribute the Forward-Looking Strategies as widely as possible. As well, an analysis of how these measures impact on federal policy has been undertaken and coordination has begun

among those Ministries with responsibility for specific issues such as health promotion, employment equity and collection of statistics.

The Nairobi World Conference on Women gave governments a chance to make a commitment beyond 1985 to the status of women. The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies provide an opportunity and a framework to advance the status of women to the year 2000. While governments must implement the FLS, it is up to women and men to encourage these efforts to ensure that the status of women will improve over the next fifteen years.

- Status of Women Canada has prepared an audiovisual presentation on the World Conference on Women and Forum '85 called *The Nairobi Legacy*. This 14-minute production captures the sights and sounds of Nairobi in July 1985. The production is available in French and English in ½ inch VHS or slide-tape formats. To borrow this production please contact: Status of Women Canada, Communications Unit, 151 Sparks Street, 10th Floor, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 1C3 (613) 995-7835.
- Additional copies of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies (an excerpt of the Report of the World Conference) are available free of charge from: Status of Women Canada (at the above address) or from the United Nations Association in Canada, 63 Sparks Street, Room 808, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5A6.
- A complete copy of the *Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace* (UN Document A/Conf. 116/28) is available at cost from: the United Nations Association in Canada (at the above address).

Maureen O'Neil has been Deputy Head (Co-ordinator) of Status of Women Canada since 1978. Internationally, she represents Canada on the UN Status of Women

Commission, is a special advisor to the Canadian Delegation to the United Nations General Assembly, and is President of the OECD Working Party No. 6 on the Role of Women in

the Economy. She also represents Canada at meetings of Commonwealth Status of Women officials.

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