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35 Years Observing the United Nations A Personal View

Summary of a seminar by Griselda Kenyon 23rd May 2012

In 1976 Griselda Kenyon arrived in Geneva. She spoke French, had been a member of the British Federation of University Women for some years and had already very much enjoyed a conference of the International Federation of University Women. IFUW headquarters was in Geneva so eventually Griselda screwed up her courage and went to ask them about the Geneva Association. The IFUW office staff made her very welcome, gave her tea and biscuits and told her lots of interesting things about what IFUW did. Very soon she was invited to be an observer at United Nations meetings as an IFUW representative.

Griselda's husband was a Foreign Office Diplomat, assigned as First Secretary to the UK Disarmament Delegation in Geneva and Griselda was relieved to have a useful role to play rather than spending a lot of her time at cocktail parties.

An elderly lady, who had worked at the UN for many years, mentored Griselda as they went to UN meetings in Geneva, meetings on Human Rights (mostly the problem of Chile under Pinochet), women's meetings, meetings of non-governmental organisations and anything else of interest.

Even though Griselda had studied political philosophy and Karl Marx she was quite unprepared for statements emanating from the Communist Group in the UN, not only official government statements but also statements by Non-governmental Organisations. On one occasion a pad was passed round for signatures to indicate attendance at a meeting. Fortunately Griselda looked back at the first page and read a statement full of unacceptable proposals: signing the sheet would have indicated agreement, so she passed on the pad unsigned.

Many friendships were made at the UN - with University Women, members of other organisations who passed on news, those she worked with on joint statements for governments. Over coffee and cakes she picked up the gossip and scandal, sometimes in trilingual conversations, the language changing in order to find the right word. It was all great fun and one of the best things about being at the UN.

UN Structures - Commissions

The main UN centres were in New York, Geneva and Vienna. Griselda was interested in the Economic and Social Council which dealt with Women, Population and Development, Narcotics, Crime Prevention and so on. Most of the subjects had a commission with a limited number of member states evenly divided among the regional groups. Membership was time limited but could be renewed subject to agreement. For example, the UK was a member of the Commission on the Status of Women but preferred to be on the Human Rights Commission. This partly explained why the UK was not very interested in Women's issues at the time, despite the number of Women's organisations who were lobbying the government.

Within the commission member states worked in regional groups with a rotating chair: the UK worked with the European Group and attended EU briefings. A draft paper for the year's subject would be prepared, the content of which invariably gave rise to behind the scenes haggling. The draft always referred to previous agreements and these were not negotiable. These meetings worked by consensus and did not vote texts.

UN General Assembly in New York

Griselda was able to join her husband in New York for about two and a half months in the years when the UK Committee on Disarmament was reporting to the First Committee of the UN General Assembly. She was accredited by IFUW to visit the Third Committee of the General Assembly when the Commission on the Status of Women was reporting. There she met UN representatives of the various organisations interested in women and other social issues, made many friends and learnt to find her way about UN Headquarters.

On one occasion Griselda was at a committee in a fairly empty gallery, listening to a talk about preparations for the Year of the Child which was being organised by the Polish ambassador. She wondered if this could become a disguised attack on Women's Rights, since their ideas were much on the Kinder, Küche, Kirche line. The speech seemed mild enough so she left, followed by a woman who had been sitting beside her, who remarked that nothing happened there. When Griselda explained why they had to keep an eye on these things, the woman looked bored and left. However, the woman had gone straight to Griselda's friend who ran one of the New York NGO groups and the friend arranged a meeting for the three of them next morning. The woman turned out to be a New York Times reporter: as she left she

thanked them briefly for explaining things. They had underestimated her. Ten days later, an excellent, well researched piece appeared on the front of the New York Times.

Griselda found the General Assembly especially interesting as she could see the process through from discussions and conclusions in smaller committees in Geneva to conclusions reached at meetings of every country in the UN. The meetings were very long in those days as there was no time limit on speeches. People used to take a coffee break during some speeches. A striking figure was the sister of the Shah of Iran, whose arrival was preceded by four large men in uniforms and boots who appeared and stood around the room. The Shah's sister was flanked by two more bodyguards who stood very close while she spoke and then they would all tramp out with the lady in the middle. Now General Assembly speeches can last no more than fifteen minutes and meetings end at 6pm because overtime for interpreters became very expensive.

The Big Conferences

The era of big conferences began in Mexico in 1975 with the Conference on Women, the main result of which was to ask for the formulation of a convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Another Women's Conference in 1980, moved from Iran following the fall of the Shah, produced no final document because there was disagreement about South African Women and about Palestinian women. The third Women's Conference was in Nairobi in 1985 and ten years later came the Beijing Conference of 1995, one of the largest of its kind. More than five years work went into its preparation and there was a huge and genuine effort by most countries to produce a working document which would be relevant and effective in helping women to achieve their rights. It is still in use today, its provisions still supported and quoted as the bottom line below which no subsequent document shall sink.

Binding Conventions

The first Commission on the Status of Women that Griselda attended spent a long time discussing the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which had been proposed in Mexico in 1975. Lawyers had drawn up chapter headings and contents but they were under serious discussion until 1979 when it was opened for signature and ratification. Fifteen years later in 1994 it was realised that there needed to be a procedure to check whether countries that had ratified the Convention were fulfilling their obligations. So a Protocol to CEDAW was drawn up where, if an individual thought a government had not paid attention to her rights under the Convention and she had applied to her own legal system to no avail, she could appeal to the Committee on the Optional Protocol for further consideration of her case. CEDAW led to other Conventions.

These agreements were drawn up by special committees of people who were experts in the subject. One amusing incident occurred at one of the CEDAW sessions. They were discussing the right to inherit nationality from the mother not just the father. This sparked impassioned debate, mostly from men in the room. Then a lady from somewhere in Africa pointed out that in her country everyone inherited their nationality from the mother – after all anybody could be the father! There was a stunned pause, then hilarious laughter. The proposal was accepted.

The importance of Conventions was that, if a country signed, indicating approval, and then put in place all the legislation for implementation, then that country could be called to account by a UN Committee. The country would be inspected by the CEDAW committee every four years.

Human Rights Conventions:

Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Covenant on Economic, Civil and Cultural Rights

Convention against Torture

Convention against Genocide

Rights of People with Disabilities

UN Security Council Resolutions and ratified Conventions are the only agreements that are binding.

Summing up, Griselda remarked that, as with all things, results depended on current thinking and the political climate of the time. The early 90's were a period of hope, hard work and conferences, followed by many agreements. Optimism gradually faded and came to an end with the 9/11 attack. Since then there had been little major agreement on social

issues. It was however important that the struggle continued in the hope that our daughters and sons would carry on and achieve what our generation had tried to do.

We felt very privileged to have heard and discussed some of Griselda's thoughts about working in the United Nations.

Cynthia Richmond

Griselda Kenyon

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