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COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AND HEALTH QUESTIONS

WORLD CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED NATIONS DECADE FOR WOMEN

(Copenhagen 14-30 July 1980)



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On the occasion of International Women's Year (1975), the Intergovernmental Conference of the United Nations (Mexico) adopted a world action plan laying down a series of measures to improve the status of women which it was hoped governments would take during the period 1976-85, proclaimed "Decade for Women", whose objectives are: equality, development and peace.

Held half-way through the Decade, the Copenhagen Conference, whose subsidiary themes were employment, health and education, had the following aims:

- to assess the results of the first five years of application of the world plan at national, regional and international level, and
- to prepare an action programme for the second half of the decade, particularly in the fields of employment, health and education.

At the request of certain states the United Nations General Assembly had already in 1979 included in the agenda of the Conference three questions linked with current political conflicts:

- consequences of apartheid for the status of women in Southern Africa,
- consequences of the Israeli occupation for Palestinian women within and outside the occupied territories,
- the situation of refugee women throughout the world.

One hundred and forty five governmental delegations attended the Conference, including delegations from all our member states with the exception of Liechtenstein and Malta. Five national liberation organisations and movements also attended as observers, and various United Nations organs, intergovernmental institutions associated with the United Nations and a dozen other intergovernmental organisations, including the Council of Europe, were represented.

Lastly, 131 non-governmental organisations holding consultative status with the Economic and Social Council were also present at the Conference, which, furthermore, was open to the public - though the number of seats available was very limited. In all, about 3,000 people officially took part in the Conference.

All the heads of delegation spoke in the general debate. At the same time proceedings went on in committee. These covered the finalisation of the action programme, a draft of which had been drawn up at three preparatory meetings. Committee No. I evaluated progress and obstacles at national level, and committee No. II made the same evaluation at regional and international levels.

The introduction to the action programme - historical background and underlying principles - gave rise to some particularly difficult discussions, which had to be continued within a plenary committee. This was because of the highly political nature of certain proposed amendments on which it was impossible to find a compromise, such as the one presented by India on behalf of the Group of 77 which, by including the term "Zionism" in paragraph 5, equated it with the concepts of racism and imperialism.

Unfortunately, these debates were the ones most widely reported in the press, which tended to overlook the more substantive proceedings.

It was amendments of the kind just mentioned that prevented the action programme from being unanimously adopted by the Conference. It was eventually approved by 94 votes in favour (including Greece, Portugal and Spain) and 4 against (United States, Canada, Australia and Israel) with 22 abstentions (including the EEC countries, Austria, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland).

The action programme is a very long document which covers all the problems affecting women in the spheres of education, employment and health throughout the world. It puts forward strategies and priority fields of action for the next five years.

Although problems vary considerably in form from one region to another, I observed genuine goodwill and a sense of solidarity among the participants - features which the press as a whole generally ignored, preferring to emphasise the "politicisation" of the Conference, even though politicisation of that kind is inevitable at a world conference and was in fact a fairly minor aspect of the proceedings.

The action programme is addressed firstly to national governments and secondly to regional and international authorities. It should be noted here that informal consultations between Western states proved to be of great value. They were furthermore helped by prior contacts within the Council of Europe through the Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of Women. This committee had been created by the Committee of Ministers partly in order to prepare the Conference. With its aid, the Secretariat had also prepared a booklet on previous Council of Europe action for equality between women and men. This booklet, which is among the papers distributed to you, shows that the Assembly as well as the Committee of Ministers have already taken action along the desired lines. But there is still a long way to go: hence the proposals for future action to be found in the chapter on "Future Prospects", on page 26. The Ad Hoc Committee drew up these proposals for the Committee of Ministers, which will be examining them in the near future.

Our own Committee might wish to be kept informed by the Secretariat of any action taken on these proposals.

Apart from the action programme, the Conference adopted a number of resolutions - 45 in all - in which it drew attention to some highly specific problems.

Two of these resolutions deal with the situation of women within the United Nations Secretariat and its specialised agencies as well as other international organisations. In this respect the Council of Europe seems to be in no better a position than the other organisations, and here it is to be hoped that the initiative by the Committee on the Budget will produce results.

Another resolution deals with the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. This Convention, the adoption of which by the United Nations General Assembly on 18 December 1979 was adjudged a very important step by the majority of delegations at the Conference, received 59 signatures during the Conference, with the result that by 29 July it had been signed by 76 states, including Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

It requires 20 ratifications or accessions to enter into force, and has to date been ratified by four countries (Cuba, German Democratic Republic, Guyana and Sweden) and acceded to by one (Guinea).

The Convention provides, amongst other things, for the submission of reports on steps taken to give effect to its provisions. These reports will be examined by a committee elected from a list of candidates proposed by the Contracting Parties from among their nationals. The first election - 18 persons - will take place six months from the date of entry into force of the Convention, ie seven months after the deposit of the 20th instrument of ratification or accession. (Subsequently, the committee's membership will be increased to 23). It would seem to be in the interests of European states to be present at this first ballot, and we should spare no effort to obtain, firstly, the signature of our governments and, secondly, speedy ratification.