

## **Conscience of the United Nations: Non-Governmental Organizations**

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Frequently I am asked what contribution the School Sisters of Notre Dame made to the United Nations during my nine years, 1993-2002 as our first Non Governmental Organization Representative. During those first years I believed that SSND presence became firmly established within the NGO community and several UN departments. Because of our interest and concern for the eradication of poverty, human rights for women and children, especially girls, we were well-qualified along with several other religious congregations of women to work on a global agenda. We became known as an international organization with sisters on four continents; we participated in coalitions with other NGOs in preparing statements, disseminating information, and preparing programs.

### ***SSND addresses NGO Briefing***

Each Thursday morning, the UN Department of Public Information offered a briefing to the NGO community. Covering different issues each week, these briefings presented current thinking on commissions and conferences going on within the Economic and Social Council or UN General Assembly. The presenters were drawn from the UN agencies and departments, the Ambassadors or their staff from a country that had taken a special initiative on the issue, and a representative of an NGO working on the issue. On one cold January Thursday, I presented the efforts and initiatives of SSNDs on the Education of Girls within one or two countries on each continent. I shared the podium with the educational consultant of UNICEF and the Ambassador of Uganda to the UN. Later that day, many people told me that they were surprised and delighted to hear about the diversity of our ministries in education. All this came from information gathered in less than a week.

Each year, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) met in New York. This Commission consisted of 40 countries representing all regions of the world. NGOs were given limited opportunities to speak at this governmental meeting. However, I was able to arrange for a Peruvian student of the School Sisters of Notre Dame studying at the Academy of the Holy Angels, Demarest, NJ, to deliver the statement from the UNICEF *Working Group on Girls*, an NGO group of mature women with whom I worked. She was able to attend and speak to the Commission. This opportunity was offered to a young Peruvian student only because she was

part of the SSND delegation, which is associated with the UN Economic and Social Council.

Within my first few months at the UN, I worked with a coalition of NGOs in preparation for the **World Summit for Social Development** and the **Fourth World Conference on Women**. In both cases, we made significant contributions concerning education. For the Social Development document, our lobbying brought about an emphasis on girls and boys rather than children, on quality education rather than simply access to education. For the Conference on Women document, we worked with leadership from African delegations and achieved great success by getting “the Girl Child” to be one of twelve women’s concerns in the document. Since that time, the needs of the girl child are included in almost every document of the UN particularly those dealing with human rights, disarmament, environment, and development.

### ***Celebrating Freedom of Religion***

The **Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief**, proclaimed by the General Assembly - 25 November 1981 is acknowledged and celebrated each year by the NGO community. SSNDs took a significant role in preparing the Interfaith Prayer Service and providing the music in the Church Center Chapel across from the UN. This service offered a reflective time for Government delegates and NGO representatives following the special briefing on the state of the world situation for the freedom to express one’s religion or belief.

During the 1990s, the United Nations assembled many more conferences and summits than at any other time in its history. School Sisters of Notre Dame participated in several of these events: *The World Summit on Social Development*, *The Fourth World Conference on Women*, *Habitat II* (Human Settlements), *The Hague Appeal for Peace*, *The World Conference against Racism*, *The World Summit on Sustainable Development* and *the Conference on Financing for Development*. Fourteen different School Sisters of Notre Dame from seven different countries on four continents participated. Each sister returned to her local community and neighborhood with a new perspective on basic issues. At the same time, we brought a Catholic Social Teaching perspective to the items on the world agenda.

Occasionally, someone asks what event or person at the United Nations changed me. There are four such events; three hope filled experiences and one discouraging episode.

The first group consisted of sisters from 7 provinces across NAMA. The second experience was the International SHALOM meeting with sisters from all ***SHALOM Representatives Coming to the UN***

Twice I invited a group of approximately 20 SSNDs to come to the UN for three days to meet the people who make up the United Nations Organization and to listen to their concerns and perspectives on our global community. These days were followed by three days of theological reflection in what was then called the Wilton Motherhouse.

Because the US press focuses on the failures of the Security Council and the political struggles among nation states, I wanted to present the UN as I experienced it. At the United Nations I interacted with people who are deeply concerned about others, particularly those in developing countries who don't have clean water, sanitation, quality education, health care, or sustainable livelihoods. I wanted the SSNDs to meet these people; I wanted them to hear about eradicating poverty, abolishing war, upholding human rights for all and preserving our planet.

The first group consisted of sisters from 7 provinces across NAMA. The second experience was the International SHALOM meeting with sisters from all parts of the SSND world. In both cases I had the opportunity to provide a learning experience for SSNDs that could only be found in this setting. It also enabled me to hear from other regions about their realities concerning, poverty, war, environment, and human rights. I believe the group of presenters and the group of participants was mutually enriched by the experiences. I was personally challenged and inspired by my encounters with each SSND and UN colleague. It was a privilege to have hosted these guests. Because I am a New Yorker, there was an additional privilege for me to welcome SSNDs to my native city.

Ambassadors or high ranking staff members of countries where our sisters live met with School Sisters of Notre Dame. UN employees who spent their whole adult life working with one of the agencies or departments, and NGO representatives from organizations very different from ours met with us: they presented their dreams, their successes, and difficulties in making our world a better place for all. SSNDs saw how each group functions at the UN and how differently each sees the needs, who makes the decisions, and who controls the political will.

## ***Participating in Action for Peace and Disarmament***

At the *Hague Appeal for Peace*, I discovered a great spirit of peace among the participants. They provided a world filled with hope. I met several Nobel Peace Prize recipients, former child soldiers from Sierra Leone, religious leaders from a variety of faith traditions, artists, musicians, and entertainers. The overwhelming call to abolish war has stayed with me. It came from everyone present. Those who grew up in an atmosphere of conflict have moved beyond that; they too presented a message of peace. I see myself as an educator and called to speak for peace, to vote for peace. I was inspired by Archbishop Tutu of South Africa, Queen Noor of Jordan, Mairead Corrigan Maguire of Northern Ireland, Father Michael Lapsley from South Africa who lost both of his hands from a mail bomb, a prominent Rabbi from the Hague, and the hundreds of members of NGOs working with truth commissions and in programs of reconciliation.

## ***Standing against Violence toward Women***

Listening to presentations and absorbing the tragedy of violence is not the way I would choose to commemorate International Women's Day, March 8. In 1998, the main issue for review at the Commission on the Status of Women was violence against women. Several organizations prepared a daylong program with women from many countries giving testimony of their experiences of violence. It was directed toward them simply because they were women. The program began with a woman from Ireland explaining her experience of violence from her husband. We listened to girls who experienced traditional customs / rituals such as female genital mutilation, early forced marriages, and abuse from in-laws. Young women who had been child soldiers told their stories about recruitment and rehabilitation. There were women who survived the violence of war and other conflicts, sexual abuse from the opposing armies, and the devastation that follows war.

This program was well planned and presented in interesting ways. A vast variety of media were used such as film interviews and video conferencing, along with poetry, music, drama, telling the story from every corner of the world. The setting was the UN General Assembly Hall, an

awesome room with a wonderful history. For me, the day filled with messages of violence against women will be remembered as a very discouraging experience. How can these situations be so all pervasive in our world? How could patriarchy have taken such a tragic violent toll on the lives of women and also on the hearts of men?

### ***Being Inspired and Challenged***

It was a wonderful privilege being the first NGO Representative for the School Sisters of Notre Dame. I was provided with a broader vision of our congregation and a deeper meaning for parts of our SSND Constitution, **You Are Sent**, especially those related to ministry, education, and prayer. I have been inspired by our sisters from different parts of the world with whom I have visited and who have attended UN events. The great needs of our global community overwhelmed me. To find possible solutions to at least some of these concerns for SSNDs to address is challenging. I found it challenging to seek possible solutions to some of the concerns facing SSNDs. To look beyond the political struggles happening within the UN is also a challenge. To be part of the NGO community, which is the conscience of the UN, is satisfying and inspiring. The most satisfying and inspiring part of my role in the NGO community was to participate in what I believe is the conscience of the UN.

I believe that SSND association with the United Nations brought a greater awareness of the global agenda to many more sisters. This awareness then spread to our associates, students, parishioners, and other colleagues. In collaboration with our SHALOM Office, sisters from the North American Major Area (NAMA), the South American Major Area (SAMA), Europe and Africa found common ground to address international issues. With NGO connections and coalitions, some sisters joined inter faith groups to encourage their own nations to search for peace rather than obtain armaments, to struggle for social development rather than accept poverty, and to see planet Earth as our home rather than as something to dominate.