

# An equal voice

**Charlotte Bunch**

Center for Women's Global Leadership

A few years ago, violence against women was not considered a human rights issue, much less seen as requiring attention from the international human rights community. Likewise, the UN resolution to hold its first World Conference on Human Rights in 25 years neither mentioned women nor recognized any specific gender aspect of human rights. Yet, by the time the Vienna Conference ended, gender-based violence and women's human rights had emerged as among the most talked about subjects and women were seen as a well-organized constituency. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action devotes several pages to the 'equal status and human rights of women' as a priority for governments and the UN and sounds an historic call for the elimination of 'violence against women in public and private life' as a human rights obligation.

Progress on women's human rights did not happen by accident. The process has been a long time in the making and can be traced back to the growth of women's movements globally during the UN Decade for Women from 1975 to 1985. Since that time, women have continually questioned why 'women's rights' and lives have been deemed secondary to the 'human rights' and lives of men. The organized effort to change this attitude in the human rights context gained momentum at the beginning of the 1990s. Targeting the Vienna Conference as an arena for making public women's human rights perspectives began in 1991 when international, regional and local women's groups began meeting to discuss how to bring this issue before the world community.

That year, the global campaign for women's human rights launched its first annual 'Sixteen Days of Activism Against Gender Violence',

**Organizing is empowering as women discovered both before and during the Vienna Conference: a women's village meeting in Senegal**



JEREMY HARTLEY/PANOS

The World Conference on Human Rights was a historic opportunity to review all aspects of human rights in the light of our experience and observations since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Conference discussions recognized the historical, cultural and political asymmetries in different regions. We are confident that the recommendations stemming from the World Conference are objective and scientific and will lay down an enduring basis for achieving the noble principles set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

**H.E. Begum Khaleda Zia**

**People's Republic of  
Bangladesh**

linking November 15, International Day Against Violence Against Women, to December 10, Human Rights Day. A petition drive was initiated calling upon the UN Human Rights Conference 'to comprehensively address women's human rights at every level of its proceedings' and to recognize 'gender violence, a universal phenomenon which takes many forms across culture, race and class...as a violation of human rights requiring immediate action.' Initially co-sponsored by the Center for Women's Global Leadership and the International Women's Tribune Center, the petition was eventually translated into 23 languages and sponsored by over 1,000 groups who gathered almost half a million signatures from 124 countries by the time of the Vienna meeting.

This movement sought to gain recognition that 'women's rights are human rights' making clear that discrimination against and abuse of women is not less important than other human rights violations. Traditionally, women's rights have been treated as separate and not taken as seriously as human rights questions by governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Yet, more women die each day from various forms of gender-based discrimination and violence than from any other type of human rights abuse. This ranges from female infanticide and foeticide before birth to the disproportionate malnutrition of girl children to the multiple forms of battery, mutilation, sexual assault and murder that women throughout the world suffer at all ages because they are female.

Women from all regions demanded that women's human rights be discussed at their preparatory meetings (in Tunis, San José and Bangkok) as well as at other NGO and national preparatory events. The broad concerns were generally the same, but women elaborated on the specific human rights issues most important in their particular context. Several regional, national and global documents were written and exchanged by women in this process. Thus by the final Geneva International Preparatory Committee meeting to draft the document for Vienna, women were ready with common demands to present. The Geneva women's caucus included both representatives of international women's and human rights NGOs often present at such gatherings and Third World women active in their regional processes, most of whom were organized to attend through the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). This coalition crossed historic divisions not only of North/South and East/West but also of women working in

government, non-government and UN agencies. It both succeeded in pressuring for text on women in the draft document which was accepted by the governments there, virtually assuring its passage later, and formed the basis for women working together across these lines in Vienna.

The campaign sought to show how general human rights abuses specifically affect women and to demonstrate that many violations of female human rights have been invisible. Local and regional hearings gathered testimony on abuses to present to the Conference and to the UN Human Rights Commission as concrete evidence of the need for more responsiveness to women from human rights mechanisms. In February 1993, activists from around the world meeting in a strategy session at the Center for Women's Global Leadership decided to cap the campaign with a tribunal on violations of women's human rights in Vienna.

Women were chosen to testify on specific issues in each region within five broad themes: Human Rights Abuse in the Family; War Crimes Against Women in Conflict Situations; Violations of Women's Bodily Integrity; Socio-Economic Violations of Women's Human Rights; Political Persecution and Discrimination. The Tribunal gave expression to the life and death consequences of women's human rights violations – demonstrating how being female can be life threatening, subjecting some women to torture, terrorism and slavery daily. Thus, while women were lobbying for official recognition of our human rights from the UN, we were also defining them for ourselves in our own forums.

But women wanted visibility not only as victims but also as actors on the world scene, involved in reshaping human rights perspectives to take better account of all people's lives. Many women participated in working groups on other topics and sought to bring gender perspectives into areas such as development and democracy, or racism and xenophobia. In this effort, we met with resistance. The Conference was more willing to acknowledge some specific women's human rights concerns separately than it was to integrate women fully into all topics and address gender as a factor in every area.

Given the extent to which women's human rights were almost invisible at the beginning of this process, the considerable discussion generated by women organizing around Vienna may be our most enduring success.

The Conference's recognition of women's human rights and violence against women – publicly or privately perpetrated – as basic human rights issues can be used in working for government accountability for these abuses.



Women also achieved visibility in the human rights world which should lead to greater inclusion in future endeavours. Attempting to integrate gender into all areas of human rights discussion was less successful and poses a challenge if women's human rights are to be central to human rights and not ghettoized into a separate and probably still unequal sphere. In particular, the gender implications of socio-economic rights must be spelled out further and gender, race, class and culture understood more clearly as intertwined in shaping violations of women's human rights.

An important aspect of this organizing was the empowering impact it had on women – both those involved directly and those who heard about it through the media. For many this was the first time they imagined that abuses women suffer routinely can be understood as human rights violations and addressed by global institutions.

Further, organizing to influence the UN and international human rights machinery was an educational process for most of the women who had little experience in these areas. The

challenge is to continue such organizing so that more women learn to utilize these mechanisms locally and to pressure for concrete action internationally.

One goal in Vienna was expanding the possibilities for redress of violations of women's human rights internationally. In areas like violence against women, women can now argue in local courts and with national governments that the UN has recognized this human rights abuse and mandated state action on it. This will not automatically end such violations but it provides another tool for fighting to prevent them. To be effective, wide dissemination of information about the Vienna Declaration is required along with training in how to use it and other human rights instruments on behalf of women. Further, local pressure is needed for realization of the Conference's call to strengthen implementation and ratification without reservation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

The challenge is implementation of the Vienna promises throughout the UN system.

**Women from all regions of the world have succeeded in putting women's rights high on the international agenda**



ORIN PALUKOVITCH-PANOS

**Women can now argue that violence against them has been recognized by the UN as an abuse of human rights**



This is no small task given the bureaucracy's resistance to change and the reluctance of governments to put money into women's concerns.

In Vienna, the women's caucus organized by UNIFEM brought government, non-government and UN agency women together with personnel in UN human rights positions (UN Human Rights Centre, treaty bodies, Special Rapporteurs, etc) to discuss implementing the Vienna Declaration and bringing gender perspectives into their work.

Women must continue this ongoing work and be present at meetings of the UN Human Rights Commission and other such bodies to press for concrete measures, such as appointment of a Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, and adequate funding for these initiatives.

At the end of the World Conference, women called upon the UN to make timetables and plans for gender parity and

gender-awareness training for its staff as well as to report on progress toward implementing the Vienna Declaration at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in September 1995 in Beijing.

There is much to be done to implement and expand the Conference's recognition of women's human rights at many levels.

But by defining woman abuse as a human rights violation that the state has a responsibility to end, rather than as a private problem or 'just life', a critical step forward has been taken.

The words of the Vienna Declaration and the consciousness that the Conference raised were important moves towards ending the violation of women's human rights. The Vienna Conference was part of a continuing process to improve women's rights which is precisely why women targeted it as an important place to be present and to be heard.

And we were.