

Where the UN Has Failed to Live Up to Its Mission: Looking Back to Look Forward

*Devaki Jain**

It is important to recall the primary purpose for the founding of the United Nations in 1945, at the end of World War II. The UN was to function as a negotiating table, to preserve peace, and to prevent the kind of global wars that the world had just lived through and that had led to so much destruction. In addition to this main objective, the organization was also founded to build a more “just” world. Over the years, however, the UN has moved away from its original mandate as a peacekeeping agency, an arbiter between nations, to take a much greater interest in the economies and development of its member nations. If the original ideal of the UN was to foster a family of nations on a fair and level playing field, the UN has instead become a bureaucratic monster trying to engage with countless subjects, while using a one-size-fits-all view. Over time, as the UN began venturing into issues such as social reconstruction, politics, and economics, it has moved away from its original purpose. It has also added enormous burdens of finance, staff, and restrictions on member states. Looking back over its seventy-five years, it is my view that this distraction and dilution of mission led to the UN failing to achieve its original primary objectives and losing its relevance. The time has come to whittle away at the UN, and gradually enable it to shed many of its departments, including its regional secretariats, and return to its original peace-keeping mission.

This is a task of tall order, as the UN structure has become its own vested interest with large, self-perpetuating bureaucracies that continue to grow and claim

*Assisted by Shivangi Gupta, who received her master of science degree in economics from the Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) School of Advanced Studies in New Delhi.

more funds. In addition, employment with the UN has extraordinary value: a high salary, no taxation, and lifetime health insurance after five years of service! All these benefits must be paid for with the contributions of member governments as set forth in the UN Charter.

The UN was supposed to be a club or collective that could stand up against domination of one region of the world by another in order to confront aggression and stand for deep, strong democratic processes. However, the nations of the world have founded so many economic as well as political clubs on different grounds, oftentimes religions too, that compete against each other. The appearance, therefore, of multiple identities among the nations makes the earlier concept of a family of nations untenable.

By breaking itself into many parts and creating new structures dedicated to subjects such as food and agriculture and population, as well as creating regional offices such as the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and on and on, the UN has become like an octopus stretching into regions and governments without restrictions or accountability. Furthermore, other international institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have grown in power, demonstrating that economics is power, not politics.

In terms of being an arbiter of justice, the UN was supposed to provide a level playing field, but the historical record shows that it has failed. After gaining their independence, for example, the former colonies perceived that their agenda was not sufficiently articulated and acted upon in the UN system. Hence, on June 15, 1964, seventy-seven developing countries signed a joint declaration issued at the end of the first session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Geneva to establish the Group of 77 (G-77). One could ask the question: Why was there the need for the G-77 if the UN provided a “just” space? Similarly, another formation that appeared because of the overarching domination of the UN system by what can be called the “white countries” was the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). I would argue that the G-77 and the NAM were signals of the dissatisfaction of the former colonies with the performance and direction of the UN. Today, the East-West divide may be gone, but the North-South divide between the former colonizers and the former colonized still exists.

This again brings me back to the question: If the UN had provided a level playing field with developing countries’ ideas being relevant, why were the G-77, Julius

Nyerere's South Commission (set up to define an economic South), and other networks like Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) formed?

This divide is highlighted by one of the biggest blemishes on the UN's history, one that showcased its blindness toward both racial and political issues in the Global South. While the UN was celebrating the advancement of international human rights, convening world conferences, and creating subject specific agencies from 1945 to 1990, South Africa remained under apartheid. Nelson Mandela and his comrades in the anti-apartheid struggles were breaking stones in the prison on Robben Island, while the rest of us were celebrating "one world." This disregard and lack of action on the part of the UN was, in my opinion, the organization's biggest failure.

Though over the years there were voices sounding alarms, action at the UN was far too long in coming. Indians in South Africa played major roles in the struggle for liberation in the country beginning in the 1940s, as they were affected by its racial laws. This led to India being the first country to call for the UN to address the issue of discrimination in South Africa at the very first session of the UN General Assembly in 1946, arguing for an entity to be created within the organization to address anti-apartheid initiatives.¹ In 1963, the UN established the Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid (later renamed the Special Committee against Apartheid). In 1976, the committee became the United Nations Centre against Apartheid, with Enuga S. Reddy of India named as its first director. India, along with some other countries, also initiated the boycott of South African goods in 1960, dealing a large blow to the economy of white South Africa.²

Recalling that I was celebrating the construction of DAWN, the new network of South-drawn feminists, at the Third World Conference on Women in neighboring Nairobi in 1985, while my brothers and sisters were being scorched in the Republic of South Africa, makes me wince with shame today.

Years later, in 1997, I had an opportunity to go to South Africa as the wife of the Indian high commissioner. Upon our arrival, we found a huge vase of one of South Africa's most special flowers with a card addressed to me, the wife, saying, "Welcome." I asked around and was told that this was sent by Zanele Mbeki, the wife of then-deputy president Thabo Mbeki. I later learned that she had been at the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985 (as she was living in Kenya as a refugee at the time) and had been impressed by the initiative I had

taken in founding DAWN. At the conference, DAWN had presented many panels, moving away from the UN's agenda and drawing only on voices from the brown and black world. This affirmation of "our" (brown and black people's) minds drew enormous support from the then so-called "third world," now referred to as the Global South since the classification of "third" stigmatized us, citizens of Southern countries.

GOAL SETTING TO SPUR DEVELOPMENT

Over the past two decades, the UN has shifted toward a development focus, attempting to marshal all the countries of the world to, among other things, eradicate poverty through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their follow-up, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This approach, however, has been deeply flawed and has humiliated many countries and leaders. A vivid example of this is a 2007 speech by Thabo Mbeki, by that point the president of South Africa. He stated:

The poor whose hopes have been raised many times as we make declaration after declaration against poverty and underdevelopment . . . can be forgiven for thinking that this important global leadership many a times sounds like an empty vessel. . . . this global organisation has not itself transformed and designed the necessary institutions of governance consistent with the noble ideals that drive modern democratic societies. . . . Yet, the cold reality is that it will be difficult for the UN in its present form fully to implement its own decisions and therefore help the poor achieve urgently the MDGs. . . . The question we should ask is why there is an absence of the same resolve [as that shown in Western Europe and Asia after World War II] to assist poor nations today?³

Such efforts made by the UN to nudge and budge nations on a variety of ambitious goals—such as sustainable development and the elimination of both poverty and racial discrimination—are untenable for many reasons: nations are diverse in economic resources and management; there exist conflicts within nations based on race, tribes, and ideologies; and the small islands and poorer former colonies often require enormous financial and technical support to manage the disproportionate impacts of climate change on their populations.

The most important constraint is that internationally determined goals may not be relevant at the level of nations, which have great diversity on various counts: their population, wealth, stability, and so many more factors.

GIVING WOMEN VOICE

It might be argued that women have been given voice because of the UN. Indeed, speaking as a beneficiary of the UN world conferences on women, I can certainly affirm the positive outcome. These conferences gave the enabling first leap; namely, recognizing that there is a need to disaggregate citizens according to gender and, increasingly now, on the basis of color, history, and so forth. Yet, I would suggest that while the springboard was offered, the continuation of women's journey for self-empowerment has not yet been fulfilled by the UN.

How do I explain this? For many years, there were four small UN offices or programs related to women that were replicated all over the world. I once visited a UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) office in Yemen where the "women's division" consisted of one woman sitting in one room!⁴ In the UN's effort to create a common international platform on women's issues, it is my view that women in black and brown countries have lost out. To illustrate, let us look at the debate on unpaid care work.

People of my generation used to insist that the most important priority for advancing women's economic standing is to first ensure that the women who are laboring in similar spaces as men, doing what is called waged work, or wage-deserving work—such as breaking stones or making bricks in the construction sites, or pounding earth or silver, while the craftsmen make the pots or filigree handicrafts—should also be recognized as economic agents. That is, they should be recognized as part of the formal labor force and receive a minimum wage, protection through occupational safety measures, and so on. This was our top priority.

In more recent years, however, the focus of many feminist economists has been on what is called care work—the economically invisible work done in the home, including childcare, cleaning, cooking, and so on—something that they argue is very valuable but not recognized or rewarded as such in an economic sense. The work of these economists has become the focal point of the UN's work on women's economic justice. And thanks to the big "noise" that UN agendas make in developing countries, women's groups in the ex-colonies have involved themselves in this agenda.

It is true that care work is universal and most definitely gendered—that is, it is usually a burden or task that women undertake. The "three Cs" (as we called it in India)—cooking, cleaning, and childcare—pose a challenge for collecting accurate

data on women's economic contributions. When we (feminist economists) were trying to make our data collection systems more accurate, it was a challenge to collect household data and to separate household production from the three Cs.

However, despite its universality and importance in economic systems, the idea of recognizing household work or "care" as an economic contribution was to activists and economists of my generation a second line of argument. It may be a primary concern in the developed societies/economies where labor is in short supply and women already have the ability to be recognized and paid for formal work. But in developing countries where women are as yet unrecognized in formal work that contributes to conventional measurements of GDP, the priority must still be to get that work counted and get those women paid. Thus, I submit that when the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) chose *care* as the theme for its sixty-first annual meeting in 2017, this was because of the influence of the rich countries—the North—not because this was a major issue affecting women in developing countries.

Considering the diversity of the nations of the world, "one-size-fits-all" is not only inappropriate but also can be damaging. For example, the CSW's theme for 2020 was "Realizing gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls."⁵ But is achieving equality with males—whether in politics, economics, or society—actually a worthy goal for women in attaining well-being?

Decades ago, many of us started to challenge the goal of gender equality. We had many jokes and questions referring to men in governance, decision-making bodies, and power—especially military dictators who had, in our opinion, trashed the notions of justice and democracy. We asked, "Would you want to sit at the same table with these men?" The response was, "We will set our own table!" Another way of asking this question was, "Do we want to have or eat a piece of the poisoned cake?" In other words, should we strive for equality based on metrics that make up the GDP? It was our perception—a view I still maintain—that the elements that make up the GDP are often linked to the military and war. The defense budgets in many countries are larger than the budgetary allocations for economic and social well-being. This is not an equality to be desired.

By raising these questions, we broke away from making the agenda for the women's movement a question of gender equality, a notion that suggests comparing and catching up with men. We wanted women's skills and ideas on economics, justice, philosophy, politics, housekeeping, food, childcare—everything—to be our platform. In fact, we felt our platform should be *aspired to* by men. Thus, it was

not a race with men. It was an affirmation of our minds and lived experience as women being brought into a political philosophy and an economic program that stood for equality and justice.

I summed up my distaste for this idea of comparing women with men, on which the goal of gender equality is based, in my speech “Minds, Not Bodies: Expanding the Notion of Gender in Development” at the opening session of the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.⁶ My main point was that women are minds, thinkers, and generators of ideas and our progress needs to be seen autonomously and not in comparison with men. For this, I would like to draw support from dear Amartya Sen, from whom I quote:

Women should be seen not as patients whose interests have to be looked after, but as agents who can do effective things—both individually and jointly. We also have to go beyond their role specifically as “consumers” or as “people with needs,” and consider, more broadly, their general role as agents of change who can—given the opportunity—think, assess, evaluate, resolve, inspire, agitate, and through these means, reshape the world.⁷

THE UN AND PEOPLE’S MOVEMENTS

The recent widespread protests in India against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), led primarily by university students and widened to include other citizens, mostly women, occupied streets and squares in several cities across the country. The amendment identifies India’s population by religion and excludes Muslim migrants from three neighboring countries from fast-tracked citizenship. The protests were widespread and long lasting, with gatherings of up to ten thousand people at a time, and with women particularly involved in leading sit-ins.

This phenomenon—affirming the power of women’s capacity to bond as women and show courage in protesting in the public space despite threats of police action—has revealed a change in women’s status in India, in accessing rights and in designing their economy, that comes from their own collective dialogues and solidarities. However, these shifts are unrelated to the agendas set by the UN. The irony is that while this enormous political affirmation of the collective voice of women questioning the law and its legitimacy was gripping India, and being reported by the international press, a group of women were selected by UN

Women and the Government of India to represent India in discussions of gender equality at the CSW in 2020. It seems farcical that they would be discussing the importance of the UN's budgetary allocation for women and gender equality as if men provide the scale that women wish to reach, while the voices of the women's movement in India are talking of the constitution, the rights for different faiths, and the ability to affirm their collective power.

In many countries, continents, and regions, including Europe, Africa, and Latin America, and even the United States, similar street protests have erupted. These popular movements and uprisings again raise the question of the UN's relevance. People's movements across a variety of identities—race, religion, gender—have developed in strength and sophistication to the point where the people are able to negotiate with their governments directly. In other words, it takes bottom-up, local mobilization and local political support for protest movements to operate and be effective. It is striking that the UN's call for human rights and justice does not play any role in negotiating these challenges.

This political experience with protests in India and elsewhere has been applauded and upholds the notion that countries are able to course correct on their own when UN resolutions to reform political regimes have failed to do so. For example, India has an unusual and brilliant law called Right to Information (RTI) that gives civil society the legal right to challenge some of the government's regulations or operations that ask for more information about a practice. This particular right and the fact that it was negotiated by a nongovernmental organization has been much applauded and invoked as a model.

CONCLUSION

In sum, many UN actions in the social and economic as well as security spheres have at most bandaged an injury, as the UN has not proven good at such things as preventing conflicts. Furthermore, the UN has been displaced by other multilaterals, like the World Bank and the IMF. Even though both are technically part of the UN system, they operate very differently and largely separately from it.

The latest scourge, or challenge to global governance and to the UN system, is the current global pandemic—COVID-19. Flying across the globe, it challenges the North and the South, developed and developing countries, white, black, and brown peoples alike. The pandemic has revealed the incapacity of WHO both

to anticipate such crises and to muster its collective power to counter them when they arise, further revealing how totally dysfunctional the UN has become.

Looking back at the evolution of the UN system over seventy-five years, then, it seems to me that it has lost its relevance. Unfortunately, the UN and so many around it do not recognize this reality, and it thereby continues to claim and waste both funds and attention from countries.

NOTES

- ¹ India's appeal was for the UN to address the treatment of Indians in South Africa. It was 1950 before the General Assembly declared that apartheid was based on racial discrimination.
- ² UN sanctions against South Africa began with arms and petroleum embargoes in 1963.
- ³ "Address by President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, at the 62nd Session of the United Nations' General Assembly, New York" (speech, United Nations, New York, September 25, 2007), South African History Online, www.sahistory.org.za/archive/address-president-south-africa-thabo-mbeki-62nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly-new.
- ⁴ The other three were the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the UN-International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW), and the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues (OSAGI). Along with DAWN, these were all merged into UN Women in 2010.
- ⁵ "CSW 64 / Beijing+25 (2020)," Commission on the Status of Women, UN Women, www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw64-2020.
- ⁶ Devaki Jain, "Minds, Not Bodies: Expanding the Notion of Gender in Development" (conference presentation, Bradford Morse Memorial Lecture, UNDP, Beijing, September 5, 1995).
- ⁷ Amartya Sen, "Transition to Sustainability" (keynote address, Inter-Academy Panel on International Issues, Tokyo, May 15, 2000).

Abstract: In its seventy-fifth year, the UN needs to reflect more seriously on its value in the current global scenario, the current flow of ideas, and the current flow of power that is prevalent in the world. It is important to recall that the UN was founded after World War II as a way of addressing conflict at the negotiating table rather than on the battlefield. Negotiating peace, attempting to provide some form of justice, and affirmation of human rights seemed to be the aspiration. It is within this context that women engaged in affirming their own special location in society and economy. However, over the years the UN has revealed its inability to fulfill these goals. Perhaps in the midst of all these failures, the only category of people that has drawn strength from the UN, but now has to leave it behind, are women. Scattered as they were across a world of distances, women of different cultures and classes found strength in numbers and, through the UN system and the conferences they convened, became a power of their own. As part of the special issue on "The United Nations at Seventy-Five: Looking Back to Look Forward," this essay argues that today, however, women do not need and cannot have their aspirations be facilitated by the UN, because in their engagement with one another they have also recognized their differences. Being of similar gender does not necessarily overcome other oppressive differences.

Keywords: United Nations, women, negotiating peace, justice, human rights, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, DAWN, Global South