

Voice of Women's Institute Members Heard Globally

By Mary Janes



One of the most unique aspects of the Women's Institute (WI) organization is that the voice of each of its members can be heard globally, through the United Nations' (UN) network of agencies. Each WI member who pays her annual fees is automatically a member of the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW), a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that has Consultative or Operational Status with several UN agencies. This article shows how ACWW delivers the voices of its members to the world forum.

The people of the world work in the United Nations through NGOs for the economic and social advancement of all peoples, peace, security and the promotion of human rights. NGOs are non-profit groups of citizen volunteers organized nationally or internationally – professional, business, cooperative organizations; foundations; trade unions; religious, peace and disarmament groups; youth and women's organizations; development, environmental and human rights groups; research institutions and associations of parliamentarians. These NGOs provide a channel for United Nations information to reach the public. NGOs mobilize public opinion and build understanding of UN agencies and their programs. They also monitor and promote policies in their own countries in support of UN goals and resolutions. ACWW is one of more than 1,500 NGOs with an official relationship with the UN.

ACWW has had Consultative Status with the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) since 1947. Consultative Status enables

the UN Security Council to secure expert information or advice from organizations having special competence on subjects for which consultative arrangements are made. Recently ACWW distributed a questionnaire on women's rights to members via their societies. The results confirmed ACWW's resolve "to eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child."

ECOSOC is the backbone of the UN system, under the authority of the General Assembly. It is the principal coordinating body for the economic and social activities carried out by the organization. ECOSOC activities are aimed at promoting economic growth and progress in the developing world, respect for human rights and international cooperation in housing, family planning, environmental protection and crime prevention. Early in the history of the UN, ACWW was part of the Human Rights Commission. Currently ACWW serves on the Commission on Sustainable Development, studying issues and making recommendations. One of the successful ACWW projects towards sustainable development has been the restocking of a lake with fish to improve both the diet and general health of rural communities in El Lago, Colombia.

The FAO was the first specialized agency of the United Nations. Its mandate is to enhance nutritional levels, living standards, agricultural productivity and rural living conditions. In this regard, ACWW continues to promote the *Water for All* and *Women Feed the World* programs which it originally cosponsored with the United Nations. *Water for All* provides rural communities with clean drinking water, essential sanitation and crop irrigation. Ongoing water projects in South America, Africa, India, the Far East and the South Pacific are providing water tanks, hand pumps and sanitation facilities.

Launched in 1989, the *Women Feed the World* program is aimed at helping traditionally marginalized rural women who are the principal labour force in food production in many countries. A vital component of each project is functional literacy. Women also receive training in marketing, basic bookkeeping and establishing cooperatives and credit facilities. ACWW is committed to supporting 10 food projects, such as dairy production, beekeeping, grinding mills, market gardens and traditional food crop production, per year. Financial contributions from the members of the 375 societies in 70 countries support these projects.

In 1949 ACWW received Operational Status on the UN Organization for Education, Science & Culture (UNESCO). This organization helps maintain global peace and security by fostering greater cooperation between nations through

education, science, culture and communication. It works to combat illiteracy and increase mutual understanding between the peoples of the world through educational and cultural exchanges. In 1999 ACWW organized workshops in the Czech Republic to teach women, primarily from Eastern Europe, how to design and implement projects, how to network, how to strengthen their own organizations and how to access resources available in their own countries.

By 1953, ACWW had Consultative Status with UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund, now known as the UN Children's Fund.) Originally set up to help child victims of World War II, its mandate now is to meet the long-term needs of children in developing countries. It is devoted exclusively to children's issues.

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was created in 1984 specifically to promote the economic and political emancipation of women in the developing world. It acts as a catalyst within the UN system to link women's needs and concerns with all questions of critical interest to them at the global, national and regional levels. ACWW has had Consultative Status with this fund since 1989.

ACWW has 11 volunteers at 7 UN centres, women with expertise and experience of the UN, presenting the views of its 9 million members. ECOSOC, FAO, UNESCO, UNICEF and UNIFEM. They are located in New York, Paris, Geneva, Rome, Vienna, Nairobi and Bangkok.

In the 1998-2001 triennium, ACWW priorities have focused on four areas:

- *the status of women and children*, especially human rights and the girl child
- *health and nutrition*, in particular the family and older persons, sexual and reproductive rights, safer childbirth, population, AIDS, genital mutilation and drug abuse
- *environment and sustainable development*, looking at agriculture, food security, water, habitat and plant genetics
- *labour and income generation*, with attention to employment, micro-credit and economic rights

One person's participation through her local Branch and its relationship with ACWW can help raise the standard of living of women and families, can enable them to work towards equal opportunity and help them promote understanding worldwide. This is one way in which Women's Institute members may act locally, but have an effect globally.

Mary Janes is the Public Relations Director for the Ontario Coordinating Committee planning the ACWW 2001 Conference.