



Isis-Manila

Leticia Ramos Shahani

Lessons, Leaps and Linkages: the UN Experience in Retrospect

by Rosanna Langara

Legislator. Educator. Diplomat. Journalist. International civil servant. Women's rights advocate. The outstanding career path of Leticia Ramos Shahani in the struggle for human rights and women's rights, both locally and internationally is, indeed, unique. She has become a repository of the hopes of women worldwide.

Growing up in the province, Shahani, at an early age, had a sense of what a woman can do. Along with her siblings (including a brother, Fidel Ramos who

was the president of the Philippines from 1992-1996), she was raised in an unshackled and egalitarian environment by her working mother (whom she saw as more than her mother and wife to her father) and her politician-father. In addition, her education and her early exposure to the United Nations reinforced her understanding and appreciation of feminism and the rights of women.

Shahani is widely recognised as among the top-ranking women of the UN. She

has been a proud witness to the historic development of the women's movement within the UN. Recounting the early years of the UN when the Commission on the Status of Women was only a section of the Division of Human Rights, Shahani describes how women's issues were marginalised in the 1960s. Back then, she recalls, there were few high-ranking women officials and women ambassadors. "The majority were men."

"It was a man's world," Shahani aptly captures the mood of those early years. But she remained steadfast in her commitment, bucking the odds. "We were fighting for a niche, which did not yet exist." In the beginning, there was very little interest in women's rights at the UN. "People thought it was a joke—they were laughing at it," Shahani recalls. "There was hardly any awareness."

In the face of obstacles—including biases that may still exist in the UN, although probably not in the same degree as

before—Shahani says she learned valuable lessons along the way. "Don't be so sensitive or touchy about opposition that comes your way," she quips. It was also imperative for a woman official in the UN to be well-informed of current issues. Despite obstacles and challenges of the early years in the UN, Shahani remained undaunted.

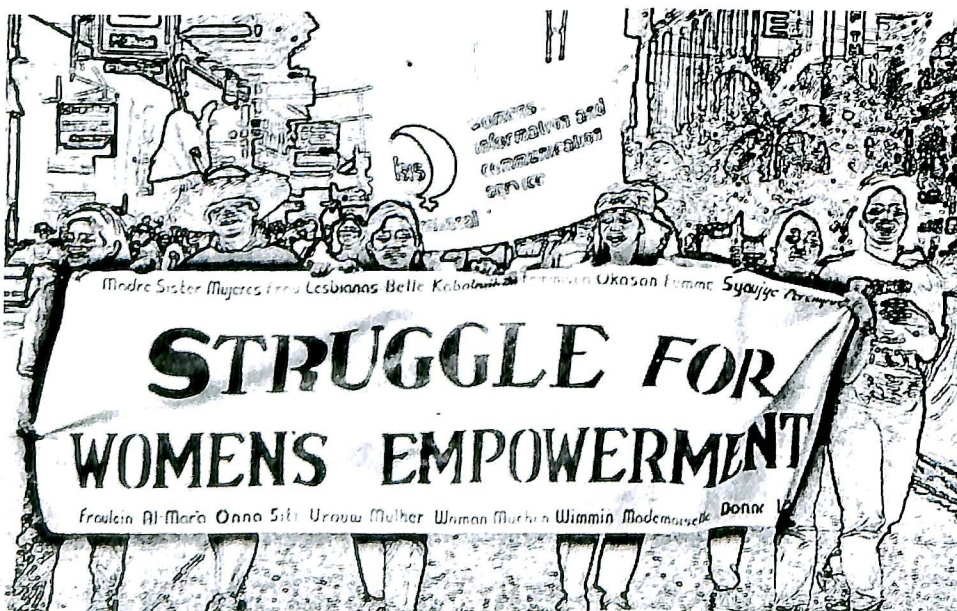
The UN convened four world conferences on women between 1975 and 1995. Each of these world conferences focused on negotiating a final document: the "Mexico Plan of Action" (1975), the "Copenhagen Programme of Action" (1980), the "Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies (NFLS)" (1985), and the "Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA)" (1995).

Each event had its distinctive characteristics. The 1975 forum was described as the "first consciousness-raising conference ever held"; the 1980 forum was identified with networking and partisan political issues; the 1985 forum was known for the challenges to mainstream-development thinking articulated by activists and NGOs from the Global South; and the 1995 forum was emphasised by concrete action in several areas.

Mexico and Copenhagen: Debates and Debacles

In 1974, Shahani chaired the UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW). The Commission then recommended that 1975 should be celebrated as "International Women's Year" and that there should be an international women's conference in Mexico City.

The "First World Conference on Women" was attended by more than 100 government delegations. It was a



Leticia Ramos Shahani was born in the province of Pangasinan in the Philippines. She completed her undergraduate work in "English Literature" in 1951 at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. She had her graduate studies in "Comparative Literature" at the Columbia University in New York, and was awarded a doctoral degree in "Comparative Literature" with highest honors from the University of Paris in Sorbonne. Shahani joined the UN Secretariat in 1964; became a member of the Section on the Status of Women (currently the Division on the Status of Women) in 1967; served as the Assistant Secretary-general for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs of the UN from 1980 to 1986; appointed as the Secretary-General of the "Third World Conference on Women" in Nairobi in 1985; and, in 1995, headed the Philippine delegation to the "Fourth World Conference on Women" in Beijing. She is her country's first female ambassador to Romania in 1975, with the distinction of being the first ambassador of the Philippines to any communist country. While in Eastern Europe, she concurrently served as the Philippine Ambassador to Hungary and to the German Democratic Republic. In 1978, she became her country's envoy to Australia.

Shahani has also served her government as the Chairperson of the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, and as the Undersecretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs. She served as a senator from 1987 to 1992, and from 1992 to 1998. Landmark laws that Shahani has authored and sponsored as senator include those pertaining to culture, education, agriculture, women's rights, foreign service, and children, among other areas. Women-specific laws among these include the Anti-Rape Law of 1997, and the inclusion of the five percent gender and development allocation from the budgets of Philippine government agencies at the national, provincial and local levels.

Presently, Shahani heads the Steering Committee of the Government Organisation-NonGovernment Organisation (GO-NGO) Network for the Centennial of the Feminist Movement in the Philippines (1905-2005). She is the current chairperson of the following organisations: Isis International-Manila, BUDHI ng Pilipinas Foundation, and Dairy Development Foundation of the Philippines. Understandably a much sought-after speaker with her vast experience on and involvement with development and gender issues, one of Shahani's most important recent speeches was given before delegates to the thirtieth anniversary of the "International Women's Year" at the 49th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSSW), 4 March 2005, held at the UN Headquarters in New York.

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historic meeting. "For the first time, governments met to discuss women's issues at the highest levels. Women got together—North and South, rich and poor," Shahani relates. The women's movement had, at last, become global. Ironically, the head of the Mexico conference was a man. "Maybe they couldn't accept that a woman could preside over an international meeting of governments. There were also many male delegates-ambassadors and diplomats," Shahani recalls. The Mexican Department of Foreign Affairs organised the conference together with the UN.

During the time of the first women's conference, the western feminists were the ones who actively pushed for human rights. Although the Global South was not yet very articulate in 1975, some work was done that advanced women's causes in developing countries. The focus of the Northern feminists was mainly on human rights, daycare centres, health, pension, and paid work. For Shahani, that in itself, although limited, was a step forward. However, the basic concerns of women of the South, such as food, medicines, firewood, had to be recognised.

The "International Decade for Women" was declared by the UN from 1976 to 1985 with the theme, "equality, development, and peace." "That is a trilogy that I like very much," Shahani

says. Equality encompasses equal rights between women and men, development covers economics and social issues, and peace deals with the political aspect.

The "Second World Conference on Women" was held in Copenhagen in 1980. "At that time, relations between Israel and Palestine were so tense and conflict-ridden. The Palestinians were very militant, and the Third World sympathised with them," Shahani says. Paradoxically, the conference was held in a first-world country, Denmark. "More than a million dollars were spent to make the world conference possible," she explains, "but the final document was not adopted by consensus because of political differences."

The Nairobi Experience

When Shahani was appointed secretary-general of the "Third World Conference on Women," she was concurrently UN's Assistant Secretary-General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs. Intensive preparations went underway for two years. Five regional meetings and four preparatory conferences were conducted. A policy document was prepared and discussed during this process. It became the basis for the NFLS.

Shahani identifies the two most striking challenges in Nairobi: (1) Can you mainstream gender with the concerns of the global South? (2) Can you adopt a conference document by consensus despite the political problems?

Women's issues were regarded as welfare issues then. Women were not considered part of the political and economic agenda. "We had to reverse that in Nairobi. In other words, we had to

reaffirm the equality of rights between men and women. In development, women certainly had an economic role,” Shahani states.

“For me, it was important that final documents had to be adopted by consensus. In other words, the women of the North and the South had to agree on women’s issues even if politically, there were many divisions in the world. The UN had to help in the negotiations.” Being a secretary-general of a world conference was, beyond doubt, a gargantuan task.

“As a secretary-general, you have to have that large vision that everything is interconnected.” Also, diplomacy is a key. Shahani recognised that each party had a position to defend. Being humble and firm at the same time was not easy.

“But you cannot be distracted from your goal,” she stresses.

It was certainly not easy to accommodate all of these interests. But Shahani vowed then that, “whatever happens, the Nairobi conference would be adopted by consensus, that we would not have the divisions that I saw in Copenhagen and in Mexico.”

The NFLS: its Contribution

The most valuable contribution of the NFLS was the mainstreaming of gender as part of the solution to attain equality, development and peace. The role of women is now part of mainstream development; it is not a welfare issue anymore. “But at that time, it was really an issue that you could be passionate about. Perhaps, that is why there are fewer passionate feminists now. Young



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Women strategising while at break during the Asian Civil Society Forum, November 2004

women take gender mainstreaming for granted,” Shahani states. The younger generation, indeed, have to be grateful for the struggles during those times.

“I’m at least satisfied that Nairobi was part of a process that began in Mexico. You could say that Nairobi was not also possible if Mexico and Copenhagen did not take place. We were part of the process. But I think some of the major battles were fought in Nairobi,” explains Shahani.

Nairobi made the BPFA possible: gender mainstreaming, identifying women in the lesser known areas, trafficking in women. In 1985, these issues were not anymore so new. “So, when I went to Beijing to head the Philippine delegation, I felt a certain sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.”

Her rich experience in the UN also helped Shahani to become an effective legislator for gender. “When I became a Philippine senator in 1987, that experience had helped me formulate some of the laws that, I think, contributed much to raising the status of women in our country.” Some of these laws include the “Shahani Law,” which addresses gender discrimination at work; the Anti-Rape Law of 1997; and a law providing for the five percent gender and development budget allocation for all government agencies.

What still needs to be done after Beijing? For Shahani, the implementation of the policies and plans is urgent. To move the NFLS and the BPFA forward, the leadership of the member-states is also crucial. Many of the responsibilities lie in

the hands of governments, such as the enactment of laws and the implementation of programmes and policies at all levels, and by appropriating adequate budget for programmes. Also crucial, in part, are the initiatives of NGOs, civil society, and the private sector.

Shahani adds an important thought. “Friends at the UN are now asking, ‘Why is it that the Philippines produces such articulate and intelligent women who are admired in the international scene yet domestically, the record of the Philippines, when it comes to women’s human rights, is embarrassing? Why are there many Filipino women who become victims of trafficking and prostitution?’”

This is a basic contradiction that Filipino women and their leaders have to resolve. Women enjoy a relatively high status in their own country but abroad, they work as domestic servants and entertainers, earning very little for their efforts, and in return, risking their lives and families. With these contradictions still existing, “many of the recommendations of Nairobi and Beijing still remain a dream,” notes Shahani.

In the final analysis, Shahani advises, “what is really important is how every national government implements an international plan of action.” Although she is proud of the international contribution of the Philippines to the women’s movement, Shahani admonishes, “we should make our country more respectable, more egalitarian, less corrupt, and more efficient. Unless we are sincere at the national level, we can not be respected internationally.”

The 1985 Nairobi conference marked the culmination of the UN "Decade for Women" but for women worldwide, it was just the beginning. The women's conferences served as the birthing incubators.



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Leticia Ramos Shahani, on wide screen, speaking before the delegates of the 30th Anniversary of the International Women's Day at the UNCSN, NY

Despite these obstacles, Shahani remains optimistic in the end, "I don't lose hope. I hope that women of the younger generation will continue the work we've done." She then compares the women's movement over the years to a major confluence of various plans and actions for the good of humanity. Her UN experience taught her "the difficulty of forging a consensus on women's issues in a world that is divided and conflict-ridden." "But we should always think positively and create hope and opportunity for others," Shahani says.

The 1985 Nairobi conference marked the culmination of the UN "Decade for Women" but for women worldwide, it was just the beginning. The women's conferences served as the birthing

incubators. Moving beyond the 1980s and the 1990s, it is clear that a global women's movement has been created and set in motion for individual nations and groups to make concrete at the grassroots level.

With the emergence of the global women's movement, it is with pride that we speak of the Philippines as being at the forefront of the struggle for women's equality through the UN, with no less than Shahani at the helm. Shahani is indeed a true champion of the women's cause.



Rosanna Langara is a freelance writer and researcher. She is currently a development worker for a women's NGO based in Quezon City, Philippines.