

**The Case of the Huairou Commission:
Local Organizing and Global Networking Campaigns**

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The Case of the Huairou Commission: Local Organizing and Global Networking Campaigns¹

Jacqueline Leavitt and Ayse Yonder

Introduction

In less than seven years, the Huairou Commission has gone from an informal, loose coalition representing an international spectrum into a global network, reaching upwards of 11,000 grassroots women's groups.² Up until 1995, women, especially from the grassroots, were locked out of discussions at the global level. They had to rely on intermediaries within formal government delegations and or within the women's movement to make their voices heard. As good as those relationships might have been, the existence of the Huairou Commission has resulted in deeper collaborations and provided a platform that grassroots women's groups can call their own. As intersecting shifts changed within the UN and in its relation to NGOs, the Huairou Commission emerged as a unique opportunity, offering a forum in which ideas are exchanged, projects jointly undertaken, and policies crafted.

The networking started in 1995 at the United Nation's (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China. Calling themselves the Women and Shelter Strategizing Groups, women meeting in the grassroots women's tent in Huairou --30 miles away from the main conference where the Chinese government had moved them--issued a statement that urged recognition and respect for the central role women play in families and communities.³ Immediately after Beijing, the groups came together around a Women, Homes and Community Super Coalition (SC) in order to prepare for the UN Habitat II Conference in 1996 in Istanbul, Turkey.⁴ There, as in subsequent campaigns, network members drove the campaigns and established the principle that the Huairou Commission would be accountable to the local groups. In this and other ways, Huairou can be seen as a process institution with an emphasis on process. The leaders see themselves as a "movement" rather than an organization. In less than seven years, the informal, loose coalition at Beijing built on its networking process and has come to represent a global network reaching upwards of 11,000 grassroots women's' groups.⁵

In the first part of this paper, we briefly describe how women's groups made use of openings provided through the UN and paved the way for an institution such as the Huairou Commission to emerge. In the second half of the paper, we describe the evolution of the

¹ The first version of this paper was presented at the IRGLUS meeting in Porto Alegre in July 17-19 July, 2002. A longer version of this paper has been presented at the "Fullbright: Women in the Global Community" Conference in Istanbul in September 18-21, 2003.

² Jan Peterson. Testimony at the Twenty-fifth Special Section of the General Assembly on the Review and Appraisal of Progress of the Implementation of the Habitat Agenda, June 8, 2001.

³ Secretary General of HABITAT at the time, Wally N'Dow visited the grassroots women's tent, was impressed with what he saw, and facilitated the next stage by announcing the formation of the Huairou Commission.

⁴ Jan Peterson, Secretariat of the Huairou Commission, recalls, "Since the member networks all had ECOSOC status, the SC never registered as a UN NGO. It was a coalition of networks." Interview with Yonder, 12 June 2002. ECOSOC, the UN Economic and Social Council, is the entity that passed a resolution in spring 1974 to organize a world International Women's Year (IWY) conference.

⁵ Jan Peterson 2001, Ibid.

Huairou Commission within a constantly changing institutional context, highlighting some of its strategies and campaigns.

The UN as an Opening

The convergence of the women's movement in the North, the increasing voices from women in the South, and the cumulative effect on the United Nations, have all played a role in the evolution of the Huairou Commission. In 1945, when the UN was established, its charter referred to equal rights for men and women. In 1946, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was established. It wasn't until the early 1960s that women scholars and practitioners began to question the largely dependent roles accorded to women in UN development strategies. It took at least another ten years before the International Development Strategy for the Second Development Decade (1970-1980) incorporated a phrase into the document: "the full integration of women in the total development effort should be encouraged."⁶ This opening was seized by some as a way of promoting women's issues. "In various sections of the UN bureaucracy, women seized the opportunity to steer resources towards activities which strengthened that active role of women."⁷ In 1972, the Commission on the Status of Women drafted a proposal to declare a women's year. Three years later, the General Assembly declared 1975 as International Women's Year. In June and July 1975, in Mexico City, new ground was broken when women from the South and North gathered in large numbers and were able to exchange views. In 1976, UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was created, in response to demands from women's organizations attending the 1975 Mexico Conference.⁸

After 1975, slowly and then accelerating, UN acted as a focal point for women's NGOs that were different from the ones that had previously related to the UN. Between 1945 and 1975, under different conditions and in different contexts, women's groups had been organizing worldwide. In many ways, the UN provided a logical opening for activism and skills honed at local levels to move to the global arena. The global summits and global conferences provided a means for organizing for what some now call the global civil society.⁹ The emergence of grassroots women's voices reached a crescendo at the Third World Women's Conference in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985.¹⁰ Some regarded this as an "apex, which was followed by a period of sluggish growth. After a low point in the second half of the 1980s, the international women's movement has come back strongly in the 1990s."¹¹

At the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, women declared that their issues extended beyond women only conferences. This broadened the openings in which women's voices from both South and North could be heard. By the time

⁶ Geertje Lycklama a Nijeholt, Joke Swiebel, and Virginia Vargas, "The Global Institutional Framework: The Long March to Beijing," in Geertje Lycklama A Nijeholt, Virginia Vargas, and Saskia Wieringa, eds. *Women's Movements and Public Policy in Europe, Latin America, and the Carribean* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), p. 26.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ http://www.unifem.undp.org/about_us/

UNIFEM's mandates were to provide financial and technical assistance to innovative programs, and within the UN system, to promote gender equality and link women's issues to national, regional and global agendas.

⁹ M. Edwards and J. Gaventa (eds) 2001. *Global Citizen Action*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publications.

¹⁰ For instance the vision for GROOTS, now the most active network within the Huairou Commission, emerged at the Nairobi Conference. It "was launched in 1989 by community leaders from around the world as a global network to support grassroots women's organizations working across national and regional boundaries..." <http://www.groots.org/about.htm>

¹¹ Nijeholt, Swiebel, and Vargas, "The Global Institutional Framework: The Long March to Beijing," p.25.

of the 1995 Beijing conference, the grassroots women's caucus may have been new but women from all regions had already started engaging with governments at a very high level. At Habitat II in Istanbul in 1996, the creation of partnership entities--local governments, academicians, NGOs, etc.—created a new stage for multi-stakeholder meetings with governments. For the first time, space was created at government meetings for NGOs to speak out on the documents. Women's attention to reviewing official documents, line by line, and then lobbying around conference agendas, continued in Istanbul. As a result of this conscious strategy, 133 references to women were included in the 1996 Habitat Agenda.

Gaining strength from the movement circulating around women's NGOs and the women's movement in general, women within the UN also took more aggressive positions, leading to studies, seminars, and reports. UNCHS-HABITAT "appointed a focal point on Women in Development and convened an international seminar with the UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) and the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs."¹² In 1988 and through 1989, the UNCHS "facilitated a series of regional seminars and one international seminar," leading to a global strategy for shelter.¹³ Advocacy by women's groups led UNCHS to begin the Women and Habitat Programme in 1991, "implementing programmes directly linked to women and women's participation in human settlements development and management, with the ultimate goal of ensuring women's rights through empowerment."¹⁴ In 1996, UNCHS issued, *Gendered Habitat: Working with Women and Men in Human Settlements Development*. Anna K. Tibaijuka, the present Executive Director of UN-HABITAT describes the shift after Beijing when the focus on women and girls was "complemented by mainstreaming strategies."¹⁵ Tibaijuka writes:

The Programme developed the original gender policy in order to accommodate these new requirements. Using the extensive experience the Programme had in implementing the Women and Habitat Programme, this policy separated the outreach and mainstreaming functions between the Women and Habitat Programme and the Gender Unit respectively.¹⁶

At the institutional level, Tibaijuka states:

Restructuring of UN-HABITAT starting in 1999 produced a new strategic vision for the Programme. The new vision states that empowerment of women is to be used as a primary indicator of the success of all of the UN-HABITAT's interventions. The restructuring also resulted in the phasing out of the Women and Habitat Programme and the creation of a Gender Policy Unit responsible for gender mainstreaming.¹⁷

This policy reflected progress about gender equality reported by countries in 2001, at the Istanbul +5 conference. In light of the new strategic vision, all branches and programmes of

¹² Jan Peterson, 2002, email correspondence with the authors.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid; Anna K. Tibaijuka, "UN-HABITAT's Gender Policy," January 2002, www.unhabitat.org/pubs/genderpolicy/foreward.htm.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid

the UNHABITAT were assigned the responsibility for gender mainstreaming. The new policy document compiled all the decisions and steering documents from Habitat that had focused on achieving gender equality into one document.

Another of the UN subsidiary bodies that supported women's issues has been the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) established in 1965. Some of its resources were directed towards grassroots women's projects, and in its most current form is organized around Thematic Trust Funds. More recently, flaws in gender mainstreaming started surfacing as both the UNDP and UNHABITAT started shedding gender units and letting go of the few and active women who were internal allies.

Through all these shifts and changing circumstances, the Huairou Commission has played at least two roles in maintaining its relations with the United Nations. The first was to monitor the restructuring within the United Nations in order to sustain the continued institutionalization of grassroots women's views at the international level. The second role was to evolve internally so as to advance and facilitate the work of the grassroots groups.

Inadvertently or not, UN global conferences provided space where grassroots women from different parts of the world came together, got to know each other, educated each other, settled conflicts, and reached consensus, despite opposing views and even value systems. Grassroots women's global advocacy was advanced as individual allies within the UN provided access to a critical mass of partners who were receptive to strategies and solutions to settlement interventions that were grassroots-driven. For instance, there were 150 women from various UN agencies invited to the HC.¹⁸ UNCHS has been the only long-term/strategic partner as it shared HC's commitment to implementing the Habitat Agenda, whereas UNDP and UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) were funding partners with HC on a project basis during the three-year strategic plan period (described below). UN resolutions and declarations provided platforms that grassroots women could use in their respective localities and openings for grassroots women's groups to shape and influence policy. When limited UN funds became available, either through UNCHS, UNDP, or UNIFEM, the Huairou Commission stretched the funds to reach the maximum number of grassroots groups. Upon the ending of the Women and Habitat Programme in UNCHS, the Huairou Commission described it as the loss of "the platform from which large numbers of women's groups could strengthen their capacities and contribute to the institutional process of mainstreaming gender equitable settlement practices."¹⁹

Structure and Evolution of the Huairou Commission

As Gaventa indicates, "where the institutions and authority of global governance are not so clear, the rights of citizenship are made real, not only through legal instruments but through the process of citizen action or human agency, itself."²⁰ Since Habitat II in Istanbul in 1996, there were several challenges that faced the Huairou Commission about organizing at the global level. These included the issues of legitimacy, accountability and representation, as well as the challenge of working at different levels simultaneously with

¹⁸ Catalina Trujillo, Director of the Women and Habitat Program, and Wally N'Dow were instrumental in helping identify these partners during the launching of the HC.

¹⁹ Peterson. Testimony 2001.

²⁰ J. Gaventa, "Global Citizen Action: Lessons and Challenges," in M. Edwards and J. Gaventa, *Ibid.* p. 278.

different types of groups.²¹ How to connect grassroots groups to global regimes? What strategies to use to consolidate a global agenda that reflects grassroots women's concerns? How to influence policies for reallocation of resources? How to continue this work without disrupting the ongoing local work?

The Huairou Commission was not starting from scratch. Its member networks have already been organizing around the UN. For instance, the International Commission on Women (ICW) traces its roots to 1888. (Chart 1) It was present at the first international conference on peace and has national councils in 72 countries. GROOTS International, as stated earlier, began in 1985 at the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya, and has nine focal points representing over 40 countries in Africa, Latin America, South Asia, North America, Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Caribbean. Habitat International Coalition Women and Shelter Network (HIC) was established in 1987 with member organizations in all continents and has spawned other networks, e.g. AWAS (Asian Women and Shelter Network).

Precedent-setting events had occurred, and some principles and strategies emerged more immediately, while others arose with each campaign. At Beijing in 1995, GROOTS facilitated the discussions in the grassroots tent and with the Grassroots Women's Caucus, and HIC-WAS with the Daily Caucus on Women and Shelter Issues. As ICW, GROOTS and HIC-WAS came together around the Women, Homes and Community Super Coalition in preparation for the Habitat II process, they prepared an International Agenda on Women and Shelter for the Habitat II meeting in 1996. At the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom), the Super Coalition, joined by WEDO (Women's Environment and Development Organization), prepared a model document on the Plan of Action, and continued its practice of holding several thematic workshops and daily debriefing sessions.

The Super Coalition prepared for months to be ready to organize on a daily basis the women's caucuses and to conduct the line-by-line lobbying around the Habitat Agenda. Subsequently with its experience from the Rio Conference in 1992, WEDO took on the role of facilitating the daily women's caucus at the Habitat II meeting. Members organized or participated in over 50 workshops. They set up an alternative Best Practices Exhibition of grassroots women's initiatives. At the same time, it was through the efforts of a local member group of the Super Coalition, the Foundation for the Support of Women's Work (FSWW), that the Super Coalition could claim a central space for its tent at the NGO site. Two of its members, the FSWW and the German Mothers Centers organized the first ever child-care center at a global meeting. At the end of the conference, each of the member networks and member groups made a commitment to work together to monitor the UN and their governments' implementation of the Habitat Agenda. This was a strategic commitment on part of the members groups with no immediate returns.

The formal launch of the HC at the Habitat Conference consolidated the networks' commitment to work together over the long term. It provided a more formal framework to support horizontal linkages and communications among the groups and their local partners, and to facilitate vertical linkages between the groups and decision-makers and funders at the regional and global levels. Within six months after the conference, the HC held its first

²¹ Jennifer Chapman, "What Makes International Campaigns Effective? Lessons from India and Ghana," in M. Edwards and J. Gaventa, *Ibid.* 259-273.

planning meeting, again in Istanbul, with network representatives and partner women from UN agencies, local governments, parliamentarians, media, etc. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss how to create a democratic platform for the existing networks to promote and consolidate a global agenda to reflect grassroots women's concerns and needs. The mission of the HC was formulated as: "to forge strategic partnerships to advance the capacity of grassroots women worldwide to strengthen and create sustainable communities."²² Its three goals were to:

- promote the institutional transformation needed to engender local community development and governance.
- strengthen the capacity, resource position, and collaboration of local women's organizations and their affiliated regional and global networks.
- increase grassroots women's participation in the decision-making processes impacting their lives with a special focus on political participation.²³

The key principle of HC's organizing has been the centrality of the member networks. Its accountability is to its members groups and its legitimacy is based on the member groups' recognition of the need for such an organization. This actually reflects the member groups' organizing approaches at the local level - i.e., placing ordinary, grassroots women's groups at the center in community development and local governance. Since 1996, the HC has used three broad strategies to organize at the global level:

1. The first strategy was monitoring the UN and governments' commitment to implement the Habitat Agenda, as well as the gender resolutions passed at various UN meetings. What had brought the groups together was their joint interest in influencing the Habitat Agenda. They all felt that working with similar-minded groups around the implementation of this agenda would make a difference at the local level. The cross-sectoral nature of the human settlement issues - from housing, physical infrastructure, social services, environmental issues and local governance - addressed the local concerns and tied together the diverse issues that the different groups worked on.
2. The second broad strategy was to work mainly with the UN, and especially the UNCHS/HABITAT despite all the frustrations. In fact, due to the shared interest in implementation of the Habitat Agenda, UNCHS/HABITAT was a natural strategic partner. Collaboration with the UN HABITAT provided some legitimacy and support to the HC's member groups in their efforts to keep their government accountable to the commitments made in signing the Habitat Agenda, even if no funding.
3. HC's third broad strategy was to initiate its own campaigns. This was critical since the HC and its member groups wanted to work with the UN and other international agencies on their own terms. HC's Best Practices and GWIA campaign, and the more recent Women and Disaster campaign are good examples of this strategy. (See Boxes 1 and 2)

In 1998, The HC prepared a 3-year strategic plan and negotiated with different agencies to fund its components. The plan, "A New Way of Partnering" reflected its move from networking and lobbying around global plans of action to refinement of its own strategies

²² <http://www.huairou.org/mission.htm>

²³ Ibid.

to implement its own campaigns to implement these plans at the local level. (Chart 2) The plan was based on the specific ongoing strategies of the HC, which can be summarized as:

1. forming strategic partnerships with local governments, parliamentarians, professionals/ academicians, and the media and linking grassroots women to women in prominent positions for advocacy and resources;
2. linking local groups and networks to each other and holding local to local and regional dialogues;
3. documentating grassroots women's practices and organizing peer learning exchanges, including the Grassroots Women's International Academy, for visibility, capacity building and advocacy.

Now, as the HC is preparing its second 3-year strategic plan, its organizational structure reflects its evolution into a format where the member groups/networks are organizing among themselves to take responsibility to initiate and lead campaigns on issues of specific concern to each of them. (Charts 3 & 4) There are now five such thematic groups at different degrees of progress in their organizing²⁴: 1) Women and Natural Disasters (Box 1) 2) Women and Post-Conflict Recovery and Development, 3) AIDS - Africa, 4) Women and Governance, and 5) Women and Security of Tenure Working Group

Box 1: Women and Disaster Campaign for Peer Learning and Advocacy

The Women and Disaster Working Group was initiated last year by two NGOs working with grassroots women's groups, Swayam Shiksan Prayog (SSP) from India and the Foundation for the Support of Women's Work (FSWW) in Turkey. Both groups were involved in post-earthquake disaster recovery. They viewed disaster as an opening to involve women in long-term development of their communities and local governance. Later joined by the Comite de Emergencia Garifuna de Honduras, they started peer exchanges and are now documenting their experiences as case studies to draw policy lessons for disaster response. The groups have partnered in dialogues with donor agencies, such as the World Bank, to draw their attention to obstacles to community participation and gender issues in post-disaster rehabilitation programs. HC has provided opportunities for them to meet with global policy makers, funders and experts. Now the groups are working on various strategies and tools, such as disaster watches and multi-stakeholder meetings, to monitor disaster policies.

²⁴ <http://www.huairou.org/campaigns.htm>

Conclusion:

In conclusion, since 1996, the HC provided a platform for facilitating global civil society, one that through its evolving structure and specific strategies has been quite effective. Its structure has evolved in ways to adjust to a global institutional environment that is in flux, but without losing its accountability to its member groups. In organizing its campaigns, it seized openings in international policy area and advocated for local practice to inform policy change. It has provided support - monetary, technical and personal - for building partnerships and for horizontal exchanges to occur across networks. The networks, not only help provide legitimacy and support for each other, but also create legitimacy and constituency for the HC itself. The sustainability of the HC demonstrates that networks and coalitions are not ephemeral and can lead to cohesive agendas for policy and institutional change.

Box 2: Our Best Practices Campaign Engenders the UNCHS Best Practices and Local Leadership Program and Creates its Own Institution for Peer Learning and Advocacy

Our Best Practices (OBP) Campaign started as a small alternative to the official Best Practices exhibition at the Habitat Meeting. The next year, the HC was invited to join the UNCHS/HABITAT Best Practices and Local Leadership Program as a thematic Center on Women and Human Settlements. After negotiations, the HC joined and became part of the its Steering Committee, represented by Monica Jaeckel from the German Mothers Centers.

Meanwhile the HC convened its own OBP Task Force meeting in Mumbai, India (following a GROOTS International Exchange with SSP) with member groups and representaives from local governments, international agencies, academicians/professionals and the media to identify its own principles, criteria, and directions. This was one of the first experiments of the HC to break the dividing line between expert and grassroots women, where they negotiated ways to listen to talk to each other.

After the Mumbai meeting in 1999, HC started collecting examples of grassroots women's initiatives based on the criteria developed at the meeting. Another Task Force Meeting was held in Prague to review the submissions from different parts of the world, as well as to support the local Chech Mothers Centers' negotiations with government representatives. The Task Force decided to submit all to the Dubai International Awards Committee but only one of the fifty submissions made it to the final ten out of 700 submissions. The HC representative on the UN Best Practices and Local Leadership Program Steering Committee continued to pressure for greater gender sensitivity and recognition of grassroots women's work, until finally in 2002, four women's projects -- including a HC member network, the German Mothers' Centers -- made it to the final ten selected for Dubai Awards.

Meanwhile, the HC, under the leadership of GROOTS International and especially the German Mothers Centers Network, established its own institution, Grassroots Women's Internaional Academy (GWIA), to use OBP cases as a tool for peer learning and advocacy. (<http://home.earthlink.net/~gwia/gwiahome.html>) The first GWIA was organized by the German Mothers Centers periodically over a four month period in Salzgitter, Germany parallel to EXPO 2000. The second GWIA was held in New York, USA, parallel to the Habitat+5 Meeting in 2001. Grassroots groups from different parts of the world came together at each GWIA to learn and teach each other, as well as to have structured dialogues with representatives from international and local decision making and funding organizations that the HC convened.

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