

What you need to know about the Commission on the Status of Women

Factsheet Commission
on the Status of Women

atria

Gender equality does not happen on its own. Around the world, governments, civil society organisations and international institutions are working together to strengthen the rights and status of women and girls. One of the key actors at the international level is the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

What exactly does this commission do? How do the annual agreements in New York affect policy in the Netherlands? And how can civil society organisations and citizens contribute to international decision-making on women's rights and gender equality?

In this fact sheet, you can read about how the CSW works, how the Netherlands is involved and how international agreements on gender equality are reflected in national policy.

What is the Commission on the Status of Women?

The CSW develops international policy and encourages countries to implement the agreements made on gender equality and women's rights. It is a functional commission of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).¹

The CSW consists of 45 Member States, which are elected by the ECOSOC based on equitable geographical distribution. Members are elected for a period of four years on a rotating basis, so that all 193 UN Member States can take part in due course. The Netherlands was a member from 2012 until 2015 and is once again a member for the period 2024-2027.

Its origins and historical context

The United Nations was founded in 1945. Four women signatories, as well as women's rights organisations, played a key role in ensuring that women's rights were included in the UN Charter. Thanks to their efforts, it was established that human rights apply without distinction as to sex; it guaranteed women's eligibility to serve in UN bodies and explicitly recognises the equal rights of women and men. They also advocated for the establishment of a dedicated commission to promote women's rights and the status of women.²

In 1946, a Sub-Commission on the Status of Women was initially established as part of the Commission on Human Rights. At the urging of women delegates and NGOs, it was elevated to the full Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) on 21 June 1946.

In 1947, the first CSW meeting took place and counted 15 representatives, all women. Among other things, the commission ensured at the time that the equal rights of both men and women were included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).³

What does the CSW do?

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is the principal UN body responsible for developing policy and reaching agreements on gender equality and the rights of women and girls. The commission monitors the implementation of the international agreements from the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and encourages countries to take additional steps.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is the UN blueprint for women's rights and gender equality, signed by 189 countries. It contains agreements for governments, civil society organisations and the UN to strengthen the status of women and to promote gender equality across 12 areas, including decision-making, violence, education, and health.

Every year in March, the CSW meets for two weeks at the UN Headquarters in New York. During this annual session, which focuses on a single priority theme, UN Member States discuss the progress regarding gender equality. Countries jointly negotiate new or strengthened commitments, which are set out in the outcome document, the Agreed Conclusions.

In addition to government representatives, civil society organisations, academics, and activists from all over the world also participate in the meeting. With hundreds of side events, the CSW has grown to become the largest annual international UN Women's Summit.

The Netherlands is one of the few countries that sends not only civil servants but also an NGO representative and a youth representative to the CSW in New York.

Anti-gender movement

Since the establishment of the CSW, its work has been shaped by a range of sometimes conflicting political interests. Even during the founding of the United Nations in 1945, some countries opposed the explicit reference to women in the UN Charter.⁴

From the 1990s onwards, an international anti-gender movement also emerged, consisting of conservative and far-right groups, seeking to undermine any progress made on gender equality.⁵ This influence is also evident at the CSW, where some countries object to terms such as 'gender' and 'diversity', despite them being included in the Beijing Declaration.⁶ As a result, it is becoming increasingly difficult to reach new agreements, and the focus is shifting more and more towards protecting existing rights.

Implementation

Following the annual CSW, countries are responsible for implementing the commitments made in the outcome document, but such implementation is not always a foregone conclusion. This is because the outcome document is not a legally binding treaty (unlike the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women). However, it is an important set of joint commitments outlining what countries will work towards, allocate resources for and develop policies on. Civil society organisations can therefore use the outcome document to hold governments and parliaments accountable for their commitments regarding gender equality.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is the most important legally binding international treaty on women's rights. It was adopted by the United Nations in 1979 and requires countries to eliminate discrimination against women and to promote gender equality in legislation, policy, and practice.

International agreements from the CSW are implemented in the Netherlands through:

- National emancipation policy
- Parliamentary debates
- Policy frameworks for development cooperation
- Gender mainstreaming in legislation and policy

Dutch civil society organisations working on women's rights and gender equality, such as Atria and WO=MEN, are committed to:

- Informing the Dutch delegation before and during the CSW on their priorities and [recommendations](#)
- Sharing information about the CSW
- Holding the government accountable for its commitments after the session

¹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/commission-on-the-status-of-women>

² The establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women has previously been incorrectly attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt, the head of the United States delegation. However, it was the feminist representatives from Latin America – Bertha Lutz (Brazil), Minerva Bernardino (Dominican Republic) and Isabel P. de Vidal (Uruguay) – who had already proposed this in 1945 at the founding of the United Nations. See: <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/united-nations-charter-1945-and-womens-rights> and <https://www.soas.ac.uk/research/recognising-women-who-shaped-un-charter>

³ Hannan, C., Iiyambo, A., & Brautigam, C. (2019). *A short history of the Commission on the Status of Women*. UN Women Headquarters Office. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/02/a-short-history-of-the-commission-on-the-status-of-women>

⁴ Adami, R. (2025). The United Nations Charter of 1945 and Women's Rights. *History Now: The Journal*, issue 74. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/united-nations-charter-1945-and-womens-rights>

⁵ According to researchers, this movement has emerged since the 1994 *International Conference on Population and Development* in Cairo and the 1995 *Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing*, where the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were adopted. See: McEwen, H. and Narayanaswamy, L. (2023). The international anti-gender movement: Understanding the rise of antigender discourses in the context of development, human rights and social protection. UNRISD Working Paper, No. 20223-06. <https://hdl.handle.net/10419/278575>

⁶ Kuhar, R. en Paternotte, D. 2017. *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe. Mobilizing against Equality*. Londen: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd. ISBN: HB 978-1-7834-8999-2