



International Women's Day 2008

*"Celebrating Women"*

Conference Report

7 March 2008 - CICG Geneva



Organized by  
**"Women for the  
World"**, an NGO-  
Committee on the  
Status of Women Working Group \*

Co-conveners:  
Elly Pradervand, Women's World  
Summit Foundation (WWSF)  
& Valeriane Bernard  
Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual  
University (BK)

NGO-CSW Working Group



*'Women for the world'*  
c/o WWSF 11 avenue de la Paix, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

*\*The NGO-Committee on the Status of Women works at the United Nations in Geneva under the auspices of the  
Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the United Nations (CONGO)*

**Program - "CELEBRATING WOMEN" - International Women's Day 2008**

**14:00 Opening Remarks**

*Krishna Ahojapatel, NGO-CSW President*

*Message from Mrs. Micheline Calmy-Rey, Swiss Minister of Foreign Affairs*

*read by Sarah Vincent*

***Moderators:*** *Elly Pradervand, WWSF, and Valeriane Bernard, BK*

***Musical interlude:*** *Rime Shretah and Ingrid Annan McCarthy, Singers, Vincent Castelain, Guitar*

**15:00 Panelists**

*Krishna Ahojapatel, NGO-CSW President*

*Roselyne Fayard, Journalist / Coach*

*Anne Cuneo, Journalist / Author*

*Pierre Pradervand, Author / Adult Trainer*

*Sarah Vincent, Student at Cycle d'Orientation de Vuillonnex - a Geneva Highschool*

*Wu Qing, Senator, Professor and WWSF President, China*

*Rupa Manuel Silva, President of the Sri Lanka Women's Bank and*

*WWSF Prize for Women's Creativity in Rural Life Laureate*

**16:00 Workshop (guided process)**

*Participants gathered in circles of 10 to share their experiences of a woman or women who inspired them to become who they are today*

**17:15 Closing Plenary and Acknowledgements**

*Several workshop facilitators shared examples of their role models*

*Acknowledgement of sponsors*

*Video filming of the event and video interviews of panelists with the aim of producing a video record*

*Interviews on Television Leman (three panelists)*

**8:00 Reception**, sponsored by the NGO-Committee on the Status of Women, the Women's World Summit Foundation WWSF and World YWCA.



## Opening Remarks

**Elly Pradervand**, co-convener of the NGO-CSW working group “Women for the World”  
WWSF Executive Director and United Nations representative



Elly Pradervand welcomed the participants and especially thanked the 65 high school students and their teachers from the Cycle d’Orientation de Vuillonex (one of Geneva’s public high schools) who attended the conference “Celebrating Women” on International Women’s Day. Elly acknowledged the International Conference Centre for graciously putting at its disposal free of charge the largest hall for the event. She also thanked the panelists for sharing their time and experiences, the interpreters for their kind services, and the musicians for creating a space of celebration.

Last but not least, she acknowledged the staff and volunteers who helped put on the events. Following a brief introduction of the role and mission of the NGO Committee on the status of women in Geneva under whose auspices the celebration was convened, she gave a brief explanation to International Women’s Day, which is annually celebrated around the world to uphold the political and social rights of women and which commemorates women’s contributions to society.

Elly then opened the conference and began celebrations by mentioning the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and honoring Eleanor Roosevelt, President of the UN Human Rights Commission back in 1948, for her pioneering role in bringing the Magna Carta to humanity. Her inspired leadership was a major factor in ensuring the passage of the Declaration. On this festive occasion, Elly also paid tribute to all the women in the world who are facing challenges, who are working hard to survive, to educate and feed their children, and those who face extraordinary discrimination and violence.

*Elly Pradervand is Founder and Executive Director of the Women’s World Summit Foundation, an international NGO network serving the implementation of women and children’s rights and the UN Millennium Goals. Active in development work and education for the past 25 years, she created numerous international programs and projects for the advancement of the status of women and for prevention of abuse and violence against children. She also serves as a WWSF representative to the UN and as a consultant to various groups and associations.*

**Valeriane Bernard**, co-convener of the NGO-CSW working group “Women for the World” and BK representative at the United Nations in Geneva

Valeriane thanked all the participants for coming and especially acknowledged Elly Pradervand from WWSF for her hard work in organizing the event. “...Why did we choose to celebrate women in our lives on International Women’s Day? Because it is a way to remember and honor those who helped us become who we are today and include them in our discussions. This afternoon, I would like that all together we consider the values and qualities that we inherited from them so that we can share them and keep them alive. This is why we will be doing at the end of the conference a workshop where all participants will have an opportunity to share personal experiences in small groups...”



*Valeriane Bernard served for the past 23 years the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University in many countries as project director, consultant and adult trainer. She is the Geneva branch coordinator.*

**On the occasion of the conference, the organizers received a Special Message from Mrs. Micheline Calmy-Rey, Swiss Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Swiss President (2007) which was read by Sarah Vincent, (14) who represented the students of the Cycle d’Orientation de Vuillonex, a Geneva high school.**





Mrs. Calmy-Rey highlighted in her Message she sent to “*Women for the World*” the role of the International Women’s Day and reminded the audience that it is the Federal Constitution that guarantees women the right to equality. This right protects women from discrimination in their professional lives. Unfortunately, this right is not always a right in reality. Despite it, women continue to earn on average 20 % less than men. And what to think of equality when it comes to work, when the domestic workload is still mostly women’s work and when our school system makes it difficult to reconcile family and professional life? A copy of her message (in French) is attached at the end of the report.

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### **Rime Shretah, Singer and Performer**

Rime Shretah is a young singer from Syria who grew up in Switzerland and touched the audience with her exceptional voice. She performed four songs, accompanied by her friends, Ingrid Annan McCarthy, singer, and guitarist Vincent Castelain. She rallied the audience to sing with her “We are One”, a song she composed especially for the event. A big Thank you to the three artists who inspired especially the students with their energy and talent.



### **Dr. Krishna Ahojapatel, President of the NGO-Committee on the Status of Women – Geneva**



Dr. Ahojapatel observed and commented on the number of young people in the audience. She emphasized the importance of appreciating the legacy inherited from women of the past who fought for women’s rights and recognition. Dr. Ahojapatel spoke on the history of the women’s movement internationally and reminded everyone of the four landmark United Nations conferences on women’s rights: Mexico in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985, and Beijing in 1995. Dr. Ahojapatel also reminded the audience of how far we have come and how far we have left to go. She reminded us that on the Indian subcontinent, every country has had women Prime Ministers. She introduced the topic of violence in the world, at all levels, and how this is an obstacle for women worldwide.

“...So what should we celebrate? We should certainly celebrate the fact that women have a voice. We should certainly celebrate that we have anti-discriminatory laws and certainly celebrate that we have international laws and many other international standards in favor of women. But we cannot celebrate the fact that more and more women are victims of violence and discrimination. We cannot celebrate that fact, but we can certainly keep on struggling, keep on fighting for women’s rights. Keep on looking at this problem in a global way. I don’t think it is a problem of one family/one house. And the other thing is, you must have heard, I’m sure, you young people must know, that the street is not safe for women. But I can assure you statistics tell us that the home is not safe for women. So if the home is not safe for women, and the street is not safe for women, where do you think women should go? Maybe we could go to another planet. I have an idea, which I have put forward in my book “*Development has a Woman’s Face*”. It’s a chapter called “*Building a New Country for Women*”. I have imagined, as I have taken information from many countries and put it together, that if we could build a country where you will have x, y, z, so many factors which are in favor of women, it is quite possible that women will be very comfortable and they will feel as though they still own half the sky. They still do not own half the sky. I just want you to know that it is a long journey and we have really traveled a long distance...”

Dr. Ahojapatel ended her presentation on a positive note, reminding the audience that there are many women in all countries forming associations, groups, and organizations and who are fighting and struggling for human rights and recognition of women's contributions to society. There is hope for a more just world.

*Dr. Ahojapatel served for 25 years in the United Nations system, mainly at the ILO where she was editor of the Journal "Women at work". She also served as Deputy Director at INSTRAW, as Chair of Women's Study at Mount Saint Vincent University in Canada, as a member of the International Development Studies program where she is currently a Distinguished Visiting Professor teaching courses on the UN, development and gender. She is also an author and international speaker.*

### **Roselyne Fayard, Journalist/Coach**

"...Who are the women who inspired me? When I turned twenty-five, I found myself in difficulties. Men, in my experience, were lacking sensitivity and I found myself in an internal and external difficult war. I turned to a woman therapist and realized that besides her methods, it was her personality that made an impact on me. Xenia was an exceptional woman, 74 years old, of Russian origin, born into the aristocracy and related to the imperial family. She ran away from Russia at seventeen on foot. When she told me about how she first saved her life, and then affirmed her life as a woman, I was absolutely fascinated.



"What this woman shared with me when I was in a moment of discouragement, was ...*You know I lost everything three times in my life and every time I started again from scratch.* She was an extraordinary role model of strength and I had much admiration for her. Later on in my life I decided to do journalism and to support women, especially those in their transition and in search of their place in society, which is one of my areas of interest. Xenia had values, which inspired me and what I was looking for was strength, courage and determination.

"I think you don't find your place in society if you give up and let your life be guided by others. She surpassed her role as a therapist and became a model of acceptance. When I was dealing with her about something at work that appeared to me unbearable to live with, she would say *Accept what is, accept your own limits inwardly, not because you want to submit yourself, but look them straight in the face and then find in you a second breadth to express the best in you.*

"Another woman who inspired me when I was 22 and a student in Paris was Christiane Collange, a journalist. Every morning on Channel Europe 1 she approached a topic related to feminine consciousness-raising with a powerful, humorous affirmation that really impressed me. I did not know that one day I would become a journalist myself and would interview her many times and become very close. This is how I joined one of my role models through friendship.

"What seems important to me today is that we have confused power with personal power. In the first place I was looking for the power, as men embody it, the power of domination, to impose one self, one's ideas, energy and will. I realized that one day I will need to exchange the quest for power to know my personal power, which is not the same thing. And the quest for personal power lies in what are my talents, what is my strength; what is unique in me that I can offer to others. Once you discover your strength and weaknesses, life immediately requires you to go to others and become a light on their path..."

*Roselyne Fayard is a journalist and producer at the Radio Suisse Romande for more than 20 years. She specializes in interviews with personalities, society's topics and human relations. She is also a trained coach and adult trainer and created a neuro-linguistic training school.*

## Anne Cuneo, Journalist / Author



Anne Cuneo received her inspiration from Simone de Beauvoir. Born into a family where her mother did not want to have any children, which was in part caused by the assassination of her father. Anne did not receive any love from her mother, but there were three other women who inspired her to become who she is today.

The two servants in her family (one of them was illiterate) and the baker woman on the corner of the street who mothered her. "...These were the women who were always present, totally invisible and capable of upholding life in communities when societies fall apart. They were the women who kept me alive and made sure that I become independent and able to count on myself.

"Another woman who inspired me was my religious teacher who told me "it is not greatness that counts, but strength". My nurse who implied that I needed to go to university to stop living the life we were living at the time also motivated me greatly.

" My greatest inspiration came from Simone de Beauvoir who said *...we need to break the chain of the cycle...* I realized that my work was to be a writer, journalist and filmmaker, something which I always tried to do, although my family did not support my vision, as they believed that my job was in the home... "

" My hope was that when I will be the age of the women who surrounded and inspired me during my upbringing, that such attitudes will be changed by then. Unfortunately, the message from Simone de Beauvoir is still necessary and maybe even more so today. We have to continue to break the chain because women's conditions are not fatal.

" There are, however, countries where it is more difficult to break the chain. All the women role models I had said the same thing, *remember you cannot do it alone; you have to count on other women, practice solidarity, and count on men as well...* "

One of her teachers, whose mother was facing domestic violence, said "that at the last analysis when nothing else matters any longer, it will then be us to educate the men and not vice-versa.

*Anne Cuneo shares her time as a writer and journalist and her work is inspired by spontaneous participation. She collaborates with the Téléjournal in Geneva and Zürich. Her many books, ongoingly re-edited and translated in German, are all a big success in the libraries of Switzerland.*

## Pierre Pradervand, Author and Adult Trainer

"...I met a woman who really inspired me while working in Algeria where I had my first significant job. She was a young divorced mother who was living in appalling conditions of poverty and was fighting all odds to raise her children in dignity. There are thousands of millions of such women in the world raising their children alone under extreme conditions. I met her children because they came to my house begging after school. She showed strength, courage and extreme perseverance and her situation finally improved after a few dramatic events, especially after two abortions she had to undergo because her husband was still visiting and claiming "his rights". So after the divorce, she finally found a job and could start a better life for herself.



" I spent quite some time in other parts of Africa as a founding member of one of the largest federation of African peasant organizations (6S) for the whole continent in the 1970's. I had the chance to travel to more than one hundred African villages where I talked to more than 1400 farmers. I developed a phenomenal respect for African peasant women who move mountains, which surpasses our imagination. I am referring to a woman from Casamance, who walked 72 km twice a week round trip to go and sell a few vegetables at the market with a profit of only 2.50 CHF, to allow her to buy a pound of sugar or cooking oil.

“ Another women from a Dogon village in Mali also impressed me greatly, who, during the drought season, walked 42 km a day to find water. Also the peasant women from Burkina Faso, who during the period of Ramadan wake up at 4 AM to cook breakfast, then work 10 hours a day in the field. When men get to rest after a hard day of working, women go to prepare the dinner and after dinner, they will start washing dishes and prepare once again the breakfast.

“ I will not hesitate to say that if African men decided to go on strike, Africa will still work perfectly. There will be a few problems with trains and factories, but the continent will still survive. However if the African women decided to go on strike, in about 24 hours the continent would begin to fall part.

“ For decades a model of win-loose relations has ruled humanity and this model is coming to an end, which is essentially a model of masculine power to conquer. This model must be replaced by a win-win model and we, the men, should accept that there is more wisdom, intelligence and hope in a win-win approach to life upon which the future of the planet depends on...”

*Pierre Pradervand, sociologist by training, has had the privilege of living, working and traveling in more than 40 countries of the five continents as researcher, international consultant, journalist and development program leader. Today he is an accomplished writer and adult trainer. The emancipation of women has always been a strong point in his career.*

### **Sarah Vincent, student at and representative of the Cycle d’Orientation de Vuillonnex – Geneva**



Sarah (14) shared her concern about women, which allowed her to organize certain events in her school.

“... I often ask myself why some of my school friends are not as concerned by what is happening. How can they not be revolted? Some women taught me to stand up and act, and one of them is my mother who invests herself 200 per cent in her work and in our family with four children. There is also my grandmother who raised five children on her own. She died last month and I am happy to celebrate her today. I also wish to mention my almost aunt, Taïna Bien-Aimé, who is an executive in the ‘Equality Now’ organization that works for women’s condition around the world.

“ All these women taught me to dare to affirm and cultivate my difference in order to assume who I am. Thanks to my activities on last year’s International Women’s Day, I met the Geneva Chief of Police and the Swiss President, Mrs. Micheline Calmy-Rey. Both of them had to fight to be appreciated and to stay in their place. These women are an example for us young people. If we do not fight for equality, who will do it? Let’s be clear, for us to go to school is normal and many complain about it, but for many others, going to school represents a great chance.

“ If parents do not teach us from early on about values such as respect, tolerance, an open mind and fundamental knowledge, who will do that? The school? In our school a big effort is made in that direction. For us students to be here today is thanks to our school. Yes, I had to fight to organize the International Women’s Day at my school but in how many countries in the world can you speak about the conditions of women during school time? In spite of it all, I wish to declare my hope in humanity, which unites us here today...”

*Sarah Vincent was born in 1993 and she has already mobilized in previous years not only at her school but also the newspaper Tribune de Geneva too publish articles on International Women’s Day to raise awareness of women’s rights. Thanks to her success, she started again this year and organized in her school the viewing of two films showing the condition of women in developing countries with the support of an African woman.*

### **Dr. Wu Qing, China, Senator, Professor and WWSF President visiting Geneva**

“ Hello everyone, I would like to give special thanks to our young brothers and sisters here today because they are the future of the world. We have gathered to celebrate International Women’s Day, and I believe it is even more important that every woman in this world be celebrated. Every single woman is a change maker, a change agent and a teacher especially the first teacher of her children because she is the one who installs into the next generation the values they uphold like the values of integrity, caring, sharing and love.



“ My mother, a very well known writer in China, is my role model. She is a famous writer whose works included the school curriculum from primary school to graduate programs in China. Her name was “**Chiei Wa Ying**” which means “Icy heart”. My grandmother was my mother’s role model because she wrote poetry as well, and was telling my mother that she should have a career and a family. Growing up in Japan, where my dad was appointed, I developed a deep hatred for the Japanese people. which was due to the hostilities that reigned in both countries. Because of this experience, I would like to tell you that nationalism could be a double edge sword.

From my mother, I learned that we should always draw a line between the people and the government because there is no government in this world that could one hundred per cent represent its people. I have been encouraged by my mother to be a global citizen because there are wars, conflicts in this world that we need to know. She also encouraged me to love, reach out, share and to care about others. This is the reason why I started to work for rural women in a very poor province of China where poverty is very high. For me to change China, we will have to change the rural areas, which will be unsuccessful if we don’t change the women first. In conclusion, I would like to share something that my mother said: Having love is having everything. Therefore love is the most important thing in life...”

*Dr Wu Qing, Deputy at the Beijing Haidian District People’s Congress, professor at the Beijing Foreign Studies University, Board member of the Beijing Cultural Development Center for rural women and Board President of Practical Skills Training Center for Rural women in China. She currently serves as President on the World Summit Foundation Board of Directors.*

### **Rupa Manuel Silva, Founder and President of a Women’s Bank in Sri Lanka and recipient of the WWSF Prize for Women’s Creativity in Rural Life in 2007**



Rupa Silva was invited to Geneva by the ILO to take part of their annual International Women’s Day celebrations. She was one of the four keynote speakers and powerfully presented her work for the economic upliftment of women in her country via micro credit and decent work.

In the afternoon, she joined the NGO-CSW “Celebrating Women“ panel and shared her experience of creating the ‘**Sri Lanka Women’s Development Service Cooperative Society**’, a bank that protects the hopes and dreams of the poor, vital for rural women, like herself.

Her service, creativity and commitment made her a laureate of the WWSF Prize for women’s creativity in rural life among other prizewinners in 2007. Facing unemployment herself, she decided to create the first women’s bank group in her area. Her strategy was to encourage poor women to begin saving regularly, no matter how small the amount, to establish a basis for loans. Total deposits today stand at 6 million US dollars for 37’000 members.



Her visit to Geneva presented WWSF the opportunity of honoring her personally for the role model she is to many and for the remarkable project she created for women in her country.

In fact, Rupa is a perfect example of thousands of women leaders around the world who care for the improvement of the status of poor women and who work for their economic empowerment. Rupa shared a testimony in her mother tongue, Sinhalese, which was translated by Ms Subhashinie Punchihetti from the Sri Lanka Mission in Geneva.

*Rupa Manuel Silva is Founder and President of the 'Sri Lanka Women's Development Service Cooperative Society', which emerged out of a pilot project of women's mutual help groups. Link to a presentation of her work : <[http://www.ilo.org/global/About\\_the\\_ILO/Media\\_and\\_public\\_information/Broadcast\\_materials/Institutionalvideos/lang--en/docName--WCMS\\_091220/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/About_the_ILO/Media_and_public_information/Broadcast_materials/Institutionalvideos/lang--en/docName--WCMS_091220/index.htm)>*

#### **4 PM Workshop - A guided process**

Conference participants gathered in groups of 10-15 for a guided workshop process. Facilitators helped with each group discussion on the topic “*share the women who inspired you to be who we are today*”

In the workshop all participants had the opportunity to reveal the wealth of their experiences and the values inherited from the women in their lives. It was a way to remember and honor those who helped them become who they are today, to include them in the discussions and to realize our female heritage.

#### **Workshop guidelines**

- 1 To be read slowly  
I seat peacefully and I remember my childhood and youth...  
I recall the women who have accompanied me in my life...  
I remember their presence ...  
And I try to perceive what they brought to my life,  
What did they pass on to me...  
In which way did they empower me to become who I am today  
I recall a significant time or a special incident with them  
*Pause*  
I share that with my neighbor  
*Pause*  
The facilitator asks the participants to share with their neighbor (in an interview fashion) an experience or a memory. After 5 minutes, it's the other person's turn to listen to her/his neighbor.
- 2 What values, special gift or talents did they demonstrate in their/my life?  
The facilitator asked participants to share with the person next to them focusing on the same question.
- 3 How and what do I still apply in my life today?  
According to group dynamics, the facilitator may ask the participants to share with the group, if time permits, or with either neighbor, 2 to 3 minutes max. per person.
- 4 How do I feel today and how can I apply it further, and in a more conscious way in my life today?  
Question to be offered as food for thought to be reflected upon personally at the end of the workshop.



During the workshop via the above introspective questions, participants explored and recalled the women that empowered and inspired them.



## *Closing Plenary*

After the workshop, participants gathered again in plenary to hear from workshop facilitators and from participants about examples of women in their lives. Thanks to the lively participation of the high school students and a very international crowd, the workshop was an opportunity for all to reflect and to share the values and capacities they inherited from women in their lives.

The co-conveners closed the conference by thanking all participants and sponsors of the event and invited everyone to a drink of friendship where we could meet informally. During the lively reception, participants continued to share about their role models and celebrated International Women's Day 2008. The experience was positive and requests to repeat such "International Women's Day celebrations" were expressed.

### **Acknowledgements of event sponsors**

Center International des Conférence Genève CICG  
Women's World Summit Foundation WWSF  
Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University BK  
NGO-Committee on the Status of Women  
World YWCA  
La Mairie de Meiner  
La Mairie de Jussy

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the teachers from the Cycle d'Orientation de Vuillonex for accompanying the students  
the volunteer for video filming the event and conducting individual video interviews  
the photographer, Tanya Rist, who covered the event  
the Television Leman Bleu which presented excerpts of the conference on the evening news in a lead-up to 8 March International Women's Day

## **ABOUT THE NGO-COMMITTEE ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

### **Mission Statement**

- To highlight the significant role of women in society, the need for their participation at all levels of decision-making and the strength and importance of feminine energy.
- To overcome the external and internal barriers that prevent women from achieving equality unified development, justice and sustainable peace.
- To work together to build a society with a more inclusive political and economic agenda and a new social environment, founded on our universal values and beliefs.

### **Objectives of the working group "Women for the World"**

Originally created as a "think tank", the working group provides opportunities to explore new ways of thinking and working together, and to reflect on the values that guide our work and that of the membership organizations, especially in the context of the UN. It aims to enforce the overall NGO-Committee on the Status of Women mission "to be a strong voice for women's rights, equality, development and peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century".

### **Co-conveners of the working group "Women for the World"**

- Elly Pradervand, UN Representative and CEO of Women's World Summit Foundation (WWSF), headquartered in Geneva
- Valeriane Bernard, UN Representative and coordinator of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU), Geneva branch

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<http://www.ngocongo.org/index.php?what=about&id=148>

## **ANNEXE**

### **Message from Mrs. Micheline Calmy-Rey to 'Women of the World' on the occasion of International Women's Day 2008**

*Report produced by WWSF staff*