

NGO SPEECH by Peggy Rigaud, AWG-Languedoc Roussillon

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you on a subject close to my heart, FAWCO's history as an NGO recognized by the United Nations.

It all began in March 1993: a new FAWCO Board was elected, with Barbara Johnson of Paris was President, and me as first vice-president.

Our first FAWCO board meeting was held in June in Amsterdam-- Skype wasn't yet invented!

This was a meeting to define our goals for the next two years. Our ideas were good, but not revolutionary.

But, our hostess had invited a guest to dinner – a former FAWCO president who lived in Amsterdam – and *she* dropped a bombshell!

The guest was Shirley van Ooijen; and her bombshell was – that FAWCO work to obtain status as an NGO recognized by the United Nations.

We soon realized that FAWCO : with its numbers, its geographical distribution, its members' profiles and interests, would be an ideal candidate.

In parentheses, I would like to say that we were not going to ask to “be” an NGO – because we already were one! We were an “organization” and we were not affiliated with any government.

The term NGO, which originated with the [United Nations](#), refers to not-for-profit associations with some wider [social](#) aim ...

There are thousands of them, including the Red Cross, Médecins sans Frontières, and the Girl Scouts. They have been called “civilian society's voice”.

Barbara Johnson made achieving official NGO status an important goal of her presidency. I was enthusiastic about it too-- and I think she was happy to hand the legwork part off to me.

So, I went home from Amsterdam and began to correspond with the United Nations.

And by the way, almost all of this correspondence was done by fax-- except the part that was done by “snail mail”. Before Amsterdam FAWCO didn't use email. The United Nations didn't use it either, as far as I know.

....and I, in fact, actually went home and bought my first computer. Times have changed!!

We targeted the U.N. Department of Public Information, or DPI. This department gives news about UN activities to selected groups -- which in turn pass this news on to their members.

Since the United Nations *wants* its information disseminated, you might ask why it is necessary to obtain accreditation. But, it is. And it isn't all that easy or rapid a process.

We were pursuing the DPI, but meanwhile FAWCO continued its normal business. In March 1994, we held our "Interim" in Berne.

The "NGO concept" was new to all of us then, so I had recruited a friend who worked for the United Nations in Geneva as a speaker. We wanted her to tell us about the advantages of being a recognized NGO. So, in the course of her talk, what did she say but -- "of course NGOs don't lobby"?

Another bombshell! And a major one!

Quiet pandemonium: Nobody threw anything at her – but there was a considerable group in FAWCO who, understandably enough, said that we had to stop this NGO process immediately – since lobbying Washington in favor of U.S. citizens abroad was one of FAWCO's main activities!

We on the Board were convinced that this was a misunderstanding, but it took us a while to sort it out and establish that what she had *meant* to say was that NGOs are not "lobbyists" per se; that they do hands-on work in the real world instead.

And, they sometimes do lobby Oof! We could, after all, be an NGO, and it would not keep us from pursuing our citizenship efforts!

In October 1994, there was a "UN Regional Conference" in Vienna, to prepare for the Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing China in the summer of 1995.

This meeting offered separate NGO forums as well as the official meetings.

Admission is fairly open for NGO forums.

However, NGOs needed accreditation to participate in the high-level meetings, and only organizations whose work is deemed relevant to the platform are accepted at those.

FAWCO was not yet officially recognized by the DPI. Nevertheless, we boldly applied to go to Vienna, and were invited – to both the NGO forums *and* the high-level meetings. (Participation in the official meetings is largely a question of "seen but not heard"; whereas in the NGO forums people can be as vocal as they wish.)

Barbara and I set off gamely for Vienna, determined to attend and to learn from the veterans how to negotiate the labyrinthine ways of the NGO world.

When we got there, we found some other FAWCO members. Helen Hootsmans from Amsterdam was there with a Dutch contingent. And we met a former president of the Rome club, Alicia Paolozzi.

Alicia turned out to be an old United Nations hand, and took it upon herself to explain the way things worked. She turned out to be a good person with whom to discuss getting things accomplished.

In her lifetime she had undertaken so many projects, she told us -- that when she was asked to fill in her profession on a form, she very often wrote “undertaker”. A good profession for all of FAWCO.

Vienna is of course a FAWCO city. The previous FAWCO president, Ann Day, lived there, and invited us for dinner.

In the course of conversation around the table, the Days told us that accreditation with the DPI was good, but it was not going to be the end of our United Nations journey. The really desirable plum was affiliation with the Economic and Social Council, ECOSOC. We'd been hearing that acronym for a few days....

So, back to the drawing board, as it were – or back to my fax machine, as I sought information about how to be recognized by ECOSOC.

This was more and more like a treasure hunt; you find one clue – and it leads you to another one!

By now, it is March, 1995, and there is a United Nations Conference on sustainable development in Copenhagen. Another FAWCO city. Again we were invited, and this time FAWCO was represented by members of the Copenhagen club. It was wonderful to have ready-made reps in all of these United Nations cities!

Simultaneously, in March 1995, The FAWCO Conference took place in Nairobi, Kenya.

We were not affiliated with ECOSOC, and not yet even fully recognized by the DPI, but we *had* been invited to Vienna, so we were confident that we would be invited to China as well for the Fourth World Conference on Women.

In Kenya, we held a wonderful brainstorming session to define our “platform” for the Beijing Conference.

You won't be surprised by the content:

Our four goals for the United Nations concerned:

- Education
- Eradication of violence against women
- Environment
- Work opportunities

I'd like to give you the platform details, but there isn't time, so, thanks to Becky Tan, we have photocopies of some old FAWCO Forums; you can read all about it there.

At this same conference, our board's term came to an end, and Barbara and I became “NGO co-chairs.”

**On June 15, 1995, the United Nations Department of Public Information voted to approve FAWCO for affiliation.**

Now, we could name representatives to attend United Nations meetings.

And, five FAWCO members would receive accreditation to the Beijing Conference.

(In the end, seven of us went, and all of us were able to participate.)

The “FAWCO seven” were: FAWCO's new president, Becky Tan, of Hamburg, Helen Hootsmans, Amsterdam, Lois Pot, the Hague; Jeanne Schapp, London, Leslie Fiak, Taunus, Donna Sebti, Casablanca, and myself, from Languedoc-Roussillon.

Most of us spent our time there liaising with other NGOs, and becoming convinced that the “real work” was being done by them, much more than in the rather stuffy official meetings.

We had gone armed with brochures introducing FAWCO and outlining our “platform”. We distributed them widely.

But mostly we watched and learned – and were overwhelmed by our fellow delegates, especially the African group; they were there in force, in colorful clothes; often with no shoes; some of these women were illiterate, and all of them were making a difference in their towns and countries.

Many of the African women carried big pink and blue bags --full of things to sell to pay their way back home.

We went to countless workshops. This place was so large, and so teeming with women that we seldom saw our FAWCO friends unless by accident. One day I found myself in a huge auditorium – and I was sitting next to Leslie Fiac! So, like school children, we passed a few notes back and forth... and in one I asked her what she was going to next.

She replied, memorably “I have genital mutilation at 3:00”

In fact, I did too, so we went to that workshop together.

By the way, it was extremely impressive, given by three women, a doctor, a teacher, and a sociologist, all in head scarves, all devout Moslems -- and all of them dedicating their lives to the eradication of this horrible practice – which, they emphasized, is in no way related to Islamic teaching.

After China, the Hague gave a regional, entitled, “Back from Beijing and Beyond” – part of the “beyond” was the pursuit of ECOSOC recognition.

This required filling in reams of paper:

- submitting audited financial reports,
- giving evidence of our affiliation with the DPI (this is usually a prerequisite to ECOSOC membership. We had done things in the correct order – even though at the time we didn't know it!)
- sending newsletters and articles on FAWCO club activities that were relevant to the Economic and Social Council's goals

– and learning in the process how very impressive FAWCO's member clubs and individuals are. I made long lists of activities carried out all over the world, under the auspices of FAWCO, in aid of women, children, education, health, the environment, etc.

**On August 14, 1997, FAWCO was granted special consultative status by ECOSOC.** This was a moment to celebrate!

But naturally, it was not the end of the road. Ever since that date the members of FAWCO's NGO liaison have been working to keep us in good standing with ECOSOC. And they continue to submit detailed reports every four years.

When I told a few friends that in Dublin I would talk about our NGO history, I got a number of questions, like “What's an ECOSOC?” And, “What is CONGO?”

I'm not going to tell you what “CONGO” is – you can find the answers to all of these questions in the excellent section of the FAWCO website called “UN NGO”. Do go there and see.

**But My-Linh asked me the key question, “Do you think it has made a difference to FAWCO -- having the accreditation and status? How were we before?”**

How were we, indeed?

I certainly cannot stand here and say that previous to having NGO status FAWCO was an organization of women in hats drinking tea. Indeed, we would never have been able to obtain our status if we had not already been a very impressive and active group of women! We were already involved in countless “United Nations” areas.

Outside of FAWCO, I believe that our UN affiliation has made us better known and appreciated.

Inside FAWCO, I would tend to say that the difference has been that we have become increasingly aware of how powerful we can be; of how much our work can influence the world scene; and I hope that our individual members will have increasingly realized that

they are not alone and that, far from being “displaced persons” because we have left our home country behind, we are becoming more and more: citizens of the world.

FAWCO has had many big moments, and turning points; and it will have others; but this was definitely one of them, and I was glad to have been able to participate.

And now, before I leave you, a news flash: The United Nations chose March 8<sup>th</sup> of this year, Women's Day, to announce that, in spite of years of predictions to the contrary, there *will* be a **5th World Conference on Women – in 2015!** I expect to see FAWCO there!

Thank you.

10 minutes!