

# WOMEN WHO SHAPED THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION

Eleanor Roosevelt's leading role as Chairperson of the drafting committee of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been well documented. But other women also played essential parts in shaping the document. Some of them, and their contributions to the inclusion of women's rights in the Universal Declaration, are featured here.

## ELEANOR ROOSEVELT



**ELEANOR ROOSEVELT** of the United States holding a poster of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Lake Success, NY, November 1949.

First lady of the United States of America from 1933 to 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt was appointed, in 1946, as a delegate to the United Nations General Assembly by United States President Harry S. Truman. She served as the first Chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights and played an instrumental role in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At a time of increasing East-West tensions, Eleanor Roosevelt used her enormous prestige and credibility with both superpowers to steer the drafting process toward its successful completion. In 1968, she was posthumously awarded the United Nations Human Rights Prize.

## HANSA MEHTA

Hansa Mehta of India, the only other female delegate to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 1947-48, was a staunch fighter for women's rights in India and abroad. She is widely credited with changing the phrase "All men are born free and equal" to "All human beings are born free and equal" in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



**HANSA MEHTA** of India (left) with Carlos Garcia Bauer, representative of Guatemala, before a meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights. Lake Success, NY, June 1949.

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## MINERVA BERNARDINO



**MINERVA BERNARDINO** of the Dominican Republic (left) with Way Sung New of China, members of the Sub-Commission on the Status of Women of the Commission on Human Rights. New York, April 1946.

A diplomat and feminist leader from the Dominican Republic, Minerva Bernardino was instrumental in arguing for inclusion of “the equality of men and women” in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Together with other Latin American women (Bertha Lutz of Brazil and Isabel de Vidal of Uruguay), she had also played a crucial role in advocating for the inclusion of women’s rights and non-discrimination based on sex in the United Nations Charter, which in 1945 became the first international agreement to recognize the equal rights of men and women.

## BEGUM SHAISTA IKRAMULLAH

As a delegate to the General Assembly’s Third Committee on social, humanitarian and cultural matters, which in 1948 spent 81 meetings discussing the draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Begum Shaista Ikramullah of Pakistan advocated for emphasis on freedom, equality and choice in the Declaration. She championed the inclusion of Article 16, on equal rights in marriage, which she saw as a way to combat child marriage and forced marriage.



**BEGUM SHAISTA IKRAMULLAH**, delegate of Pakistan to the UN Third Committee. Here shown in the General Assembly Hall in December 1956, New York.

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## BODIL BEGTRUP



**BODIL BEGTRUP** of Denmark (left), with Dorothy Kenyon of the United States, before the opening of the Second Session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Lake Success, NY, January 1948.

As Chairperson of the Sub-Commission on the Status of Women in 1946, and then of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1947, Bodil Begtrup of Denmark advocated for the Universal Declaration to refer to "all" or "everyone" as the holders of the rights, rather than "all men." She also proposed including the rights of minorities in Article 26 on the right to education, but her ideas were too controversial at the time. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes no explicit mention of minority rights, but guarantees equal right to everyone.

## MARIE-HÉLÈNE LEFAUCHEUX

As Chairperson of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1948, Marie-Hélène Lefauchaux of France successfully advocated for a mention of non-discrimination based on sex to be included in Article 2. The final text of the article states that, "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."



**MARIE-HÉLÈNE LEFAUCHEUX** of France (left), Chairperson of the Commission on the Status of Women; Mary Sutherland of the United Kingdom (centre); and Olive Remington Goldman of the United States (right). Lake Success, NY, January 1948.

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## EVDOKIA URALOVA



**BEFORE** the first meeting of the second session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Begum Hamid Ali of India (left) talks to Evdokia I. Uralova, Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (centre), and her interpreter. Lake Success, NY, January 1948.

Evdokia Uralova of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic was the Rapporteur of the Commission on the Status of Women to the Commission on Human Rights in 1947. She strongly argued for equal pay for women. Thanks to her, Article 23 states that “Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.” Together with Fryderyka Kalinowska of Poland and Elizavieta Popova of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, she also stressed the rights of persons in Non-Self-Governing Territories (Article 2).

## LAKSHMI MENON

Lakshmi Menon, delegate of India to the General Assembly’s Third Committee in 1948, argued forcefully for the repetition of non-discrimination based on sex throughout the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as for a mention of “the equal rights of men and women” in the preamble. She was also an outspoken advocate of the “universality” of human rights, strongly opposing the concept of “colonial relativism” that sought to deny human rights to people in countries under colonial rule. If women, and people under colonial rule, were not explicitly mentioned in the Universal Declaration, they would not be considered included in “everyone,” she argued.



**AT PALAIS DE CHAILLOT**, Lakshmi Menon of India addresses the General Assembly prior to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Paris, France, 9 December 1948.