



WORDS

In July 1897, a tiny girl was born in Surat, Gujarat, India.¹ By then, what had been a bustling town on the Western side of India, was ravaged by the bubonic plague which would take the lives of over 12 million Indian citizens over the next several years.² But, little Hansa Mehta survived the plague. About twenty years later, she also survived an earthquake in Tokyo, Japan as she was trying to make her way back home a trip to the United States.³ That was just the start.

She studied journalism and economics in London, and when Hansa was thirty-one, she married Dr. Jivraj Mehta.⁴ Most parents would be proud. Hansa's weren't. She was born into one caste; he was born into another. In those days, it just wasn't done, and Hansa found herself excommunicated by her family.⁵ Plague, earthquake, and rejection were the start, but then there was jail time.

Hansa spent three months in prison along with other political prisoners for leading the Desh Sevika Sangh—an organization of women who joined Gandhi in protesting colonialism and seeking independence for the country of India.⁶ A few months later, she and her husband were both arrested, Hansa for her political activity, and Dr. Jivraj . . . well, for harboring such a person as his wife.⁷ That was basically how it went for a while, but then she did the unthinkable.

In 1946, Hansa ran for public office.⁸ She didn't just run for public office. She ran for an open seat—not one of the seats reserved for a woman.⁹ And, she got herself elected to the Bombay Legislative Counsel.¹⁰ Shortly thereafter, she was sent to New York with the Indian delegation for a very important meeting, and that is where she ran into Minerva Bernardino.

Minerva was a Latina-born and raised in the Dominican Republic.¹¹ Although she was ten years younger than Hansa, she had already faced more than a few struggles as well. She was born in Seibo, then a tiny town on the northeast side of the island. She was the oldest of seven children, and at the age of 15, she had to take on the responsibilities of caring for her siblings when the children were orphaned.¹²

But, she survived . . . and so did her siblings. One became a lawyer. One became a doctor.¹³ Minerva decided her role was in civil service, and by the time she was 21, Minerva was the leader of an entire section of the Dominican Republic's Department of Agriculture.¹⁴ But that role was not impactful enough. She also became a leader of Acción Feminista Dominicana—the Dominican version of the women's suffrage movement.¹⁵ It was 1929. In the U.S., the Nineteenth Amendment was barely 9 years old, and the idea of women voting was still rather novel around the world. Dominican women had to wait until 1942 before the right to vote would be included in the nation's constitution.¹⁶ But, by then, Minerva was well-known throughout Latin America as a strong leader and advocate.

And so, in 1947, Minerva found herself heading to New York with the Dominican delegation for a very important meeting.¹⁷ That is where she met Hansa and one other person—Eleanor Roosevelt. Eleanor was the chair of a drafting committee appointed by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to draft a document outlining those rights that must be considered “fundamental.”¹⁸ Eleanor was the only woman on the committee, but she was unflappable.¹⁹

The committee was composed of philosophers, diplomats, educators, judges and lawyers from nine different countries. They worked on the document for over two years but something was amiss.²⁰ At least that is what Hansa saw. Article 1 stated, “All men are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”²¹

Most thought nothing of the wording of that statement. Hansa saw an opportunity to make it more inclusive and to send a subtle message:

freedom, dignity, and equality are not gender-specific rights. She lobbied the Committee to make one, simple change: replace “men” with “human beings.” Eventually, they did.²²

Meanwhile, Minerva was hard at work on another front. She lobbied for three months to add one word to the Preamble to the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the word “sex.”²³ And so the Preamble was revised to read, “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.”²⁴

It would take another two years before the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights would be finalized. But, in 1948, it was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris, France. Three years after World War II ended, two simple women with two simple words altered a Declaration that has since given rise to over 70 treaties protecting various human rights all over the world.

¹ Sanjoy Ghose, *Rights for 'Human Beings,' not just for 'Men,'* The Wire (Dec. 28, 2020) available at <https://thewire.in/history/hansa-mehta-jivraj-sarajini-naidu-mahatma-gandhi-united-nations>.

² Aanchal Malhotra, *When the 1897 Bubonic Plague Ravaged India*, LiveMint.com (Apr. 26, 2020), <https://lifestyle.livemint.com/news/talking-point/when-the-1897-bubonic-plague-ravaged-india-111641411611802.html>.

³ Ghose, *supra* n. 1.

⁴ Niraja Gopal Jayal, *Hansa Mehta: An Early Indian Feminist*, The London School of Economics and Political Science (Sept. 12, 2022), available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2022/09/12/hansa-mehta-an-early-indian-feminist>.

⁵ *Id.* Her father later relented after a prominent community leader intervened. *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Ghose, *supra* n. 1.

⁸ Sonakshi Awasthi, *Hansa Jivraj Mehta: Freedom Fighter, Reformer; India has a lot to Thank her for*, The Indian Express (Jan. 24, 2018), <https://indianexpress.com/article/gender/hansa-jivraj-mehta-freedom-fighter-reformer-india-has-a-lot-to-thank-her-for-5034322>, last visited Feb. 10, 2023.

⁹ Robin Kirk, Hansa Mehta, Medium.com, <https://medium.com/@robinlark/a-womens-rights-champion-d1d00db4789>, last visited Feb. 10, 2023.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Barbara Crossett, *Minerva Bernardino*, 91, Dominican Feminist (N.Y. Times Sept. 4, 1998), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/04/world/minerva-bernardino-91-dominican-feminist.html>.

¹² Encyclopedia.com, *Minerva Bernardino (1907-1998)*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/bernardino-minerva-1907-1998>, last visited Feb. 10, 2023.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Crossett, *supra* n. 11.

¹⁶ *Women in Politics*, Women's Suffrage, <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/suffrage.htm>, last visited Feb. 10, 2023.

¹⁷ *United for Human Rights, Meet the Women who Shaped the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, <https://www.humanrights.com/news/2021-news-meet-the-women-who-shaped-the-universal-declaration-of-human-rights.html>, last visited Feb. 10, 2023.

¹⁸ Dag Hammarskjöld Library, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)*, <https://research.un.org/en/undhr/draftingcommittee>, last visited Feb. 10, 2023.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ BBVA, *Four Women who were Critical to the Writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, <https://www.bbva.com/en/sustainability/four-women-who-were-critical-to-the-writing-of-the-universal-declaration-of-human-rights> last visited Feb. 10, 2023.

²² *Id.*

²³ Serafin Mendez-Mendez, *Notable Caribbeans & Caribbean Americans: A Biographical Dictionary* pp. 48-49 (Greenwood Publishing Group 2003), available at https://books.google.com/books?id=NLPPrMMKmywC&dq=minerva+bernardino&source=gbs_navlinks_s.

²⁴ *Id.* This part of the Preamble is now Article 2 of the U.N. Declaration.