

CSW – Reflections
Katie Starr
March 29, 2011

Imagine an environment where a woman from the Pacific speaks to an audience of Americans, Africans, Europeans, and Asians. At the end of her speech, a woman from Bahrain raises her hand to ask a question, but before the Pacific Islander can answer, a man from Senegal interjects with his own opinions on the issue. This is the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). While CSW provides the opportunity for delegates from all over the world to meet in a vibrant exchange of ideas on the status of women, its expansive size and division into nongovernmental and governmental sessions make it a maze of conversations. This maze was so complicated I often wondered how any United Nations committee could find their way past dead ends and roadblocks to reach the finish - the 'agreed upon conclusions.' My reflections of CSW are going to focus on the two major sources of conversation I observed while there: nongovernmental organizations and policymakers. Both NGOs and government delegations held their own sessions, however the general atmosphere and the format of discussion differed greatly for each.

NGO sessions, which occurred parallel to UN government sessions, were all executed in a similar format. The NGO holding the session would present their topic of choice then audience members would have the chance to ask questions regarding what was being discussed. My favorite NGO session was one held on human trafficking, in which there was a panel of seven speakers. Granted, seven is a lot of people to allow to speak in a mere 90 minute period. This session, titled 'Commercial Sexual Exploitation and the Girl Child: A Human Rights Approach,' featured speakers that represented numerous realms of the fight against the global sex trade. Policy was represented by a

United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime speaker, the nonprofit sector was represented by the chief of UNICEF's Gender and Rights Unit, academia was represented by a researcher on men and boys engaged in commercial sexual exploitation, and victims of commercial sexual exploitation were represented by a sex trafficking survivor named Ika from the Philippines. I recall watching the panel and thinking how amazing it was to listen to people from so many different backgrounds, each with their own valuable expertise. I enjoyed this session so much because it exemplified the fusion of the public sector and policy that the UN attempts to embody. As each of the speakers presented on their respective topics all relating to commercial sexual exploitation, I wondered at how all of their valuable information could effectively be relayed to UN Women, and then to the UN General Assembly. Is it truly possible the trafficking survivor Ika's words will one day be reflected in UN policy? I highly doubted it. But because her words were present at CSW, I would still consider her part of the conversation.

The open and heartfelt conversations I experienced in almost each of the NGO sessions I attended were a stark cry from the UN government sessions held at the main UN building. In these sessions, official delegates represented their country in a formalized setting. When I sat in on a French government session, members from the French delegation sat at the front of the room on a high table. They sat facing a roomful of tables, each in a row, where the tables were filled with seats that had a country nametag to identify who was sitting there representing their country. Instead of an open and flowing dialogue between participating delegates, country representatives read prepared speeches from a piece of paper. Those who were attending the session sat around the room's perimeter, while large cameras and microphones recorded each word

spoken. The session passed from the delegate from Australia, alphabetically down the list of present countries all the way to the delegate from Zimbabwe. The French delegation remained seated at the front of the room, and kindly cut off each speaker if they went over the few minutes of time allotted to them to speak. As I listened to the delegates present their points to the French delegation (sometimes using the translation headsets) I noted how generic each of the speeches seemed. I didn't note hearing any innovative proposal being made. All delegations reported on their goals for advancing the status of women, but each of their points seemed to reflect goals that have already been established from Beijing, or before. This seemingly stagnate conversation perhaps reflects the difficulty of creating policy change at the United Nations. With so many nations' voices always present, how could you possibly take into account each point in a rapid fashion?

My experiences at CSW were divided into two atmospheres: those of the government panels and those of NGOs. While I no doubt gained a profound appreciation for how many sisters I have around the globe who join in my passion for advancing the status of women, I couldn't help but be affected by the apparent roadblocks the UN must encounter, that could make their work seem impossible at times.