

*Reflections from the 55<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women*

**Foundation and Framework**

As a Global Studies and Women's Studies major who has worked extensively with and on behalf of women of various backgrounds throughout college, the opportunity to participate in and attend the 55<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) felt like a natural next step and marked my emergence into the international arena of women's rights. During the semester in which I received the fellowship, I was enrolled in a course titled "Feminism, Sexuality, and Human Rights," in which I learned about the United Nations (U.N.) and its many human rights declarations, conventions, and treaties. I learned specifically about how feminists, LGBTIQ, HIV and sex work activists have critiqued and transformed the language and content within these documents to make them more inclusive and cognizant of the intersecting oppressions people face. This course served as my foundation for understanding the inner workings of the U.N., the purpose of its human rights framework and documents, and its strengths and limitations, which was extremely useful in the context of my trip to CSW. Engaging in research and community partnership with women's rights nonprofits in the Triangle also brought me closer to the experience and enriched my participation and understanding of the content and rhetoric used within the sessions. In the next section, I will focus on a particular session that illuminated one of the most important aspects of CSW and served as an applied example of my academic work in Women's Studies, as well as the privilege I possess as a white university student.

## **Speak for Yourself**

During the five days that we spent at CSW, I had the opportunity to attend sessions that focused on areas of particular interest to me, namely sexual and reproductive health and racial and sexual minorities. These sessions delved into topics such as how to address and reduce homophobia and transphobia in educational systems worldwide, the impact of the economic recession on Canadian women, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and natural family planning methods. Each of these sessions allowed me to hear directly from individuals working on the ground in various communities around the world. It felt as if the people who had been discussed and represented in my Women's Studies readings for so many years had jumped off of the pages of my scholarly journal articles and into my personal sphere. They were sitting on panels in front of me and in audiences beside me. They were speaking from their own experiences rather than through the filtered, albeit important lens of an article or book and I had immediate access to their opinions and musings.

The session that stood out most to me as an example of how important and exciting this direct connection and communication with grassroots advocates is was titled "Claiming Space for Pacific Women in the International Arena." I had been interested in this session ever since I had received my CSW pamphlet, which I had eagerly flipped through dozens of times already. During the CSW/NGO orientation on Monday, February 21 at the Salvation Army, a Fijian woman had mentioned the importance of the Pacific Islands having their own designation within the U.N.'s geographical areas. The Pacific Islands are collapsed under the larger Asian grouping and the woman claimed that the needs of Pacific Island women are extremely specific and that while they appreciated

their alliance with Asia, they also desired individual representation at the international level. The Fijian woman had raised her voice excitedly when she said this and the audience stirred in response. I was immediately drawn to learn more because I knew so little about this topic and the woman had spoken so passionately about it.

As I sat in the session on Wednesday morning, I listened to Australian, New Zealander, and Fijian women who had travelled thousands of miles in the wake of an earthquake elaborate upon the topics that the Fijian woman had mentioned briefly Monday morning. There was another Fijian woman on the panel who had a particularly strong impact on me as a fellow Women's and Gender Studies graduate and feminist. This woman had worked in the Fijian women's movement for four years before pursuing her graduate degree in Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University. She spoke about the challenging political climate women face in their efforts to demand structural changes from the government, as well as the tendency of Western countries like the United States (U.S.) to imagine the Pacific Islands as solely the Philippines. She asked us to recognize Fiji women's long history of activism and the need for an independent space and representation for them in the international arena.

My mind was racing trying to process the information she had shared and my reactions all at once. How many times had I heard these concepts in my Women's Studies classes, but not truly understood their application in daily life? And why did I know next to nothing about the Pacific Islands? This woman simultaneously encapsulated the challenges of individual representation and demonstrated the utter importance of speaking from personal, lived experiences. Her speech illustrated the significance and power of women and men speaking from their own experiences and

reminded me of the privileges I possess as a white U.S. citizen and university student because I had known very little about the Pacific Islands and the women who live there prior to her talk. This session and her words awakened me to the need for greater inclusion of such topics and geographical areas within media coverage and courses and the importance of connecting shared experiences across international borders while also recognizing and maintaining the historical context of one's respective community. I found it challenging to apply my insights from this session to those I attended regarding sexual and reproductive health, however, and will address those difficulties and the extreme polarization I encountered in such sessions in the next section.

### **Sexual and Reproductive Health Tensions**

I was interested in attending sessions related to sexual and reproductive health not only due to my enduring academic and community commitment to this field, but also due to the current backlash against sexual and reproductive health programs, organizations, and funding in the U.S. CSW 55 proved to be an extremely interesting and contentious time for sexual and reproductive health and I again learned far more by being there in person as a participant and witness than I could have learned solely by reading about these meetings after they had occurred.

The tensions at CSW between pro-abortion and anti-abortion groups mirrored disputes at the national level and illustrated how they are international in scope. During my attendance at an International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) session titled "Let's Talk About Gender and Rights," this tension was palpable and I found it difficult to put what I had absorbed earlier in the day into practice. The four panelists in this session discussed why utilizing gender and rights-based frameworks for the enforcement

and achievement of sexual and reproductive rights is crucial and provided examples of their comprehensive sexuality education programs in Latin American and African countries. When the panelists finished speaking, I could feel the stark tension in the room and could tell this would be a heated question-and-answer session. The room was packed with over one hundred people and the woman next to me had been on her phone the entire time, composing a long response on her notepad to share with the panelists and audience. The first woman who spoke was from Mexico City. She angrily asked why the U.S. was implementing comprehensive sexuality education programs in Latin American countries when they weren't even in the majority of U.S. educational programs. The woman who had been sitting next to me stood up and asked the panel to address Planned Parenthood's historical involvement in the eugenics movement, as well as their concentration in primarily minority communities. The panel fielded these and many other questions and responded that Latin American NGOs work with their governments to ensure that comprehensive sexuality educational programs are desired in their respective countries and that IPPF and Planned Parenthood have two different funding streams. As these kinds of questions continued to pour in, the panel finally said that it would only take questions that dealt with its programmatic initiatives.

This contentious session challenged me to listen to and validate the perspectives of women whose beliefs were different than my own and brought up past coursework I had done in a course titled "The International Politics of Sexual and Reproductive Health." In this course, I learned about national and international population control and policies and Planned Parenthood's involvement in the eugenics movement. I feel a tension in myself in that I desire for these services to exist for women and men of all

socioeconomic, racial, and national backgrounds, but also recognize the politics of transplanting U.S.-based policies and programs into different contexts. I believe it is important for organizations to recognize and own up to their histories, but I also don't think that should be a hindrance to its activities a century later.

In addition to these ideological struggles, I was also surprised to see in visual displays the use of pro-abortion rhetoric by the anti-abortion movement. A religiously affiliated, anti-abortion group continuously passed out a flier advertising their sessions titled "Gendericide, Sex Trafficking, and Violence Against Women," "Sex and the Whole Woman," and "Reproductive Health Education & A Woman's Right to Choose." The strategic use of "whole," "right," and "choice," as well as the statement that anyone, regardless of their relationship status, sexual preferences, or race, would enjoy these sessions, incited my interest due to my pro-abortion beliefs. This language made me assume that the groups organizing the event were pro-abortion, as well. It was not until I read a bit further and later looked at the website links that I discovered the organizers were anti-abortion and had very traditional views of women's roles, motherhood, and marriage. This experience demonstrated how aware and attuned one must be to the strategic use of rhetoric because I was completely fooled upon first glance!

The visual displays did not stop there. As I rode in a taxi on our last day at CSW, a story came on about a huge billboard that had been taken down in SoHo that had been put up by a religious, anti-abortion group. The billboard had said "The most dangerous place for an African American is in the womb" to draw attention to the fact that African American women get the largest number of abortions in the U.S. I was stunned not only at how much this coincided with the anti-abortion sentiment I had noted from various

groups at CSW, but also at how organized, mobilized, and bold the anti-abortion movement is and its strong linkage to religion. I had never seen such visual displays of specific groups' opinions and beliefs and again felt that these particular experiences highlighted the continuous challenges we face in our (lack of) open, inclusive, and respectful dialogues about sexual and reproductive health in the U.S., as well as the importance of applied learning.

### **Future Steps**

I am still processing the dozens of interactions, contentions, and joys I was a part of and witnessed while attending CSW 55, but have formulated some personal and organizational opinions regarding how I believe we should move forward. As I've mentioned in my paper, it is a tremendous privilege to have the time and resources to attend CSW and there are thousands of women who will never receive the chance to go and tell their stories. While I understand the importance of meeting in New York due to the presence of U.N. buildings and international embassies, I believe that women should begin having discussions about changing the location of the event every year or so to lessen the financial burden on non-U.S. dwellers and increase opportunities for more socioeconomically diverse women to attend. The continuance of WomenNC's fellowship program and the cultivation of programs like it is essential so that younger women and men can understand the connectedness of local and global issues and foster their leadership and advocacy skills in the women's rights movement at younger ages. My presentation and attendance at this event will continue to impact my life in numerous ways and will enhance my work to raise awareness about the importance of gender as a category of analysis and organizing at the local and global level.