

United Nations
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Reflection Paper

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My journey to the 57th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was one of the best and most unforgettable experiences of my life. This journey gave me the opportunity to present my research from North Carolina, attend many excellent presentations and to meet inspiring and powerful women from all over the world and learn a lot about my future job of helping women.

The overall theme of this year's session was Ending Violence Against Women and Girls. Approximately 6,000 women and men from all over the world—with different languages, cultures and education levels- came to the United Nations to discuss and define the topic of Violence Against Women and to propose actions to prevent such violence and to provide support for victims of violence. The agenda for the conference was absolutely overwhelming. Every day for a week we had to choose between attending one outstanding presentation over another. This proved difficult because every presentation sounded interesting and worthwhile.

Within this powerful context of women from all over the world supporting each other to end violence against women, there are two main areas of importance and meaning for me. The first is more objective and concerns all of the information and knowledge I acquired about the topic of violence against women. The second is more subjective and concerns all of the meaningful connections and discussions I had with other women and the inspiration I received from meeting and talking to some very powerful women leaders such as Mallika Dutt who started a program called Ring the Bell.

I have done a lot of volunteering for organizations that are helping women and I have read a lot about violence against women, especially violence against women in my home country of Afghanistan. I thought that I knew a lot about the topic. I found out at the conference that I

had a lot to learn about the topic and that the problem of violence against women is just overwhelming. I learned that women all over the world face such tragic affronts to their physical and psychological well-being. I learned that the problem of violence against women is multifaceted and will not be solved overnight. I learned that in a lot of countries the problem stems from tradition, culture and power. There is a long standing cultural and traditional belief in a value system that endorses violence against women. If the underlying culture says that the man is entitled to certain things like sex, the ability to control what the woman does with her time or her body, or even how much housework the man should do, then in that society it is the norm to act that way. That belief is passed down from generation to generation. In this type of culture, women have had no power and men control women's rights. They control this by their behavior but also by being in positions of authority such as elected officials and law enforcement. Sometimes we ignore the fact that in many countries organizations are different. For example, in some Latin American countries the police are not capable of protecting women and the main reason is culture. In developing countries it is more important for people to be respected by their families and society than going to the law to ask for help. Tradition holds an important factor in people's minds, and there is a vicious cycle that is created: the culture tells children that when I grow up, I will marry and have children; male children see their fathers beat their mothers and they think that is just what happens so they do the same thing.

In order to change this culture, women and men will have to be educated about the dangers of violence against women and women will have to demand change. Changing cultural norms is not easy and it will take many years. But starting the process of educating women and men is the only way to solve the problem. Beginning from childhood, young boys will need to be taught to respect women and view them as equals. In order for that to happen, the parents of

these children must be educated and believe in the value of women. Finally, women and girls will need to be taught to value themselves and then demand change. I learned that education is very important and it can help women become independent and live their lives free from violence. Education helps girls to become empowered, independent and have self-confidence. As Michelle Bachelet, who is Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women mentioned “Without the participation of women, there is no peace, no development and no progress.”

Besides education, one way to change the culture is to create laws that require men to treat women with respect and not to abuse them. I learned that in many countries domestic violence is not considered a crime. Education is a beginning, but in some cultures it will take not only adoption but enforcement of laws prohibiting violence against women to create lasting change. In order for laws to get passed, women and men must be educated about the dangers and threats to society that violence against women causes. This cycle of education and law is very powerful but has many moving parts and contributes to the length of time it will take to create enduring change.

I attended presentations that illustrated that the process of education was beginning to work. For example, Girls Be Heard is a program that educates young girls to speak out. Programs like Girls Be Heard help young girls and women to break the silence, not being afraid of speaking their minds and being able to express agreement and disagreement. The process of education works in many countries, for example in many South Asian countries such as India, the “Ring the Bell, One Million Men Rising,” educates every member of the society including women, men and children about violence against women. This movement tells people that violence starts at home and we are responsible to stop it. For example if we hear our next door

neighbor is beating his wife, we should go and ring his bell. Education also helps to prevent other types of violence that women are facing such as work place violence and human trafficking. Sweden was one of the first countries that said “it is not okay to purchase sex”.

The other key area that meant so much to me was the opportunity to connect with and hear from so many other women. It is empowering to know that other women share the same concern I have for other women. It is inspiring to see that other women who have little more training or education than I do are doing very positive things for women around the world. At the presentations, I had a front row seat. I asked questions. My questions mattered and they were answered. I was able to share my experiences and they were valued. I also made constructive contributions to many discussions. For example, when I was in a discussion about violence against immigrant and refugee women with a group from the United Methodist Women, the issue about how to get women the support they need came up. Immigrant and refugee women are often afraid to call 911 for help because of the fear of deportation. I used the research I had done regarding Interact and Kiran to suggest that they provide a 24 hour hotline for women to call in for help. This avoids the police and the fear of deportation and yet provides women with the support they need.

Because Violence Against Immigrant and Refugee Women was the topic of my research, I attended three events on this topic. I learned about different kinds of violence that immigrant and refugee women face in different countries. I learned that immigrant and refugee women always face a higher degree of risk compared to men and fear of deportation is the biggest one. Some European Union countries have started to work on violence against immigrant and refugee women. A lot of work still needs to be done for immigrant women in Taiwan, India and other Asian countries. I learned that 93% of immigrants in Taiwan are women. Taiwan men go abroad

to find women from other countries to marry. Usually women who marry men from Taiwan come from very poor areas whose families are desperate. These women are usually 16 years old, have little education and are sold by their own family members. They have problems in marriage and domestic violence. They face social discriminations. These women are known as foreign brides (brides who came from other countries.) and are used for cooking, cleaning and sleeping with their husband. Sometimes these women are forced to work at bars and restaurants.

I also learned that there are many ways that we can help immigrant and refugee women. For example, we can educate the marital immigrants about their rights in Taiwan and other countries. As mentioned in their presentation, when immigrant and refugee women were asked about what they need, 99% of them say that they needed jobs. Marital immigrants came from poor families and married lower social men. Many of them want to send money to their families and save money for their children. Mothers want the same opportunities for their children as others. The government should also help by making policies to help marital immigrants. Marital immigrants need to have support to protect their bodies from HIV and have jobs. They should not face social and economic discrimination. Many immigrant and refugee women don't have security at work.

We should help immigrant women who are suffering from psychological problems. We should teach the language and have access to justice. One of the women who work for migrant women in Texas told me that if undocumented immigrant women go to the police to ask for help, they will be deported right away without being heard. This is the government's job to change behavior. We also need to change the negative ideas about immigrants.

Many immigrant and refugee women are isolated. We should connect them with socialization, which is how women learn. It is hard for women to speak who have never had a voice. It is hard to protect yourself and your children from someone who has been abused you for a long time. Many women never call for help; many of these women are dependent to men. They worry about who will pay for their bills because they don't have jobs.

I was very happy to see that on International Women's Day Nisha Varia talked about Violence Against Immigrant and Refugee women. She also talked about the barriers that prevent immigrant and refugee women for asking help. She talked about unpaid wages, verbal, physical, emotional and forced labor against immigrant and refugee women. I was also happy to see Agreed Conclusions of the 57th CSW had a section on Violence Against Immigrant and Refugee Women and resolution for them.

I believe this is not end of my journey. Now that I know more about problems that women are facing, I am more eager and responsible to help all women especially immigrant and refugee women. I started to volunteer for InterAct and Kiran. Now I am beginning to see and touch about what I heard in the UNCSW and take action.