



# ***CSW Reflections***

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## **Research Topic:**

**Promoting Healthy Relational  
Norms and Messages**

***. . . to Fight Violence Against Women***



Upon returning from the 2014 United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, I am struck by the complexity of the problems surrounding women's equality, encouraged by the passion of so many, and impressed with the value that our voices as young people are an essential component to the process.

The experience of being among so many activists, politicians and experts in the field of women's rights was simultaneously encouraging and intimidating. I was pleasantly surprised to find myself among people so like myself—people doing similar things, thinking over similar issues. This commonality made the field of social justice and real change which can at times seem so far away, appear very close. Days of discussions and presentations made topics that are illusive and hard to put a framework around much more comprehensible, and that comprehension came with the encouraging realization that I can be and am a part of the solution. I came away with a profound sense of possibility. At the same time, while CSW gave me that sense of possibility, it also challenged it. For every moment of encouragement that we can see solutions realized, there was a moment of discouragement that problems are often much harder to understand and consequently solve than we would like them to be. Individual problems seem simple, but women's equality is a holistic issue and the interconnections across society make it incredibly complex. There was not one answer, and for every answer, there was a criticism.

The challenge of organizing efforts was an issue that repeatedly stood out to me among discussions and presentations. One of the great benefits of this kind of convention is the opportunity to witness interactions groups who sometimes share the same goal but with



very different views and tactics on getting there. Specifically, I got to witness many of the differences in approaches between governments and the NGO sector. The topic of NGO politics and policies is a subject I have studied previously, but this experience took it outside of the academic context and into the real world of trying to make things work. This kind of experience was invaluable in making previous fields of knowledge tangible and giving me a clear frame of reference for my future studies.

The NGO Forum Consultation Day stands out in my mind as one of the highlights of our time, I think perhaps because its clear demonstration of collectivity and passion. This event is a gathering of all the NGOs to start the first week of CSW. When you get that many activists for women's rights in one room, you begin to see the momentum. Momentum can be a hard thing to spot from one isolated viewpoint but when you bring all the different aspects together and see how they connect, you see the cause gaining strength with each piece. In many ways this event served as a celebration and I could not think of a more appropriate way to start a week dedicated to change.

From there on out, every day was a full schedule of individual NGO sessions, governmental round tables, and listening in as countries reported their status. One afternoon, in the top of the Church Center, I attended an NGO session that would leave the greatest impact on me. SKR—The Swedish Association of Women's Shelters and Young Women's Empowerment Centers—was presenting their panel on The Swedish Model—a model for combatting sex trafficking that has been somewhat controversial but very successful in outcomes. I was already somewhat familiar with the model but this was an incredible



opportunity to hear Swedes' explain its workings and the reasoning behind it. The model, which has been adopted by several European governments, criminalizes paying for, not selling sex. It holds strong claims that any effective effort against trafficking must also look at prostitution and the demand for it. There are several criticisms against this model, such as the issue of freedom and personal choice, and the concern that it drives prostitution underground, compromising support and safety for workers. The panelists addressed all of these issues showing they had worked through the consequences and criticisms that will generally be inherent to all of our efforts. I was thoroughly impressed, not only by the evident results of what such legislation has accomplished in several countries so far but also by the panel's ability to address the various concerns that surround this tactic for combating sex trafficking. Moments such as these highlighted even further the work being done in collaborations between NGOs and governments and how important that cooperation is.

Another one of the most important elements of my time at the United Nations was getting to experience just how relevant the messages we as fellows were bringing were to the conversation. Frequently, presentations given by governments and NGO leaders reiterated the importance of our topics. For me it was personally rewarding to see the increasing focus given to the need to incorporate girls' perspectives on women's rights. All throughout the convention, adolescent girls were a priority, both in understanding their unique needs and in giving them a voice in the conversation. There have been strong criticisms of the MDGs that they failed to adequately include girls in their goals and measures, or recognize that they have some unique needs to that of women. We could see that changing this. My own



research focused in on adolescent girls and their experience of teen dating violence, so I was personally invested in and encouraged by this new emphasis.

When taken all together, my week at CSW was a time that not only allowed me to witness one of the greatest platforms for women’s human rights but also gave me an opportunity to take part of the conversation. I think these two components are essential always—learning and giving. They both challenged and inspired me. I was amazed that I could come away from such a global event feeling as connected and involved as I did. And that sense of ownership is perhaps what encourages me the most, because any movement, any cause that can give people a sense of ownership can multiply activists and cause-carriers around the world. Attending the 2014 Commission on the Status of Women gave me a greater sense of possibility both in regards to women’s human rights as a whole and in regards to my role, my potential to be a part of this story. Perhaps more than anything else, this is what is so essential about bringing young people to such a global event—they begin to fully believe that these issues are theirs to engage with. After all, if we are to be those who create change for the next generation, then we are those that need to be shown that such change is possible and that we are up for the challenge.