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CSW Reflections

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**The Post-2015 Agenda:
Gender Equality,
Women's Empowerment and
Ending Gender-Based Violence**



The 58th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) presented me with a multitude of opportunities to engage with topics at a deep level, interacting with experts and thought leaders and galvanizing an interest in gender equality. Through sessions, receptions and panel events, WomenNC Fellows were able to connect our research to broader thematic issues in the area of women’s human rights both domestically and internationally. The experience was nothing short of wonderful and inspiring and this paper will outline many of the outcomes I found to be most beneficial as I reflect on my experience.

To begin, my CSW experience became largely focused on men’s involvement in preventing violence, the Post-2015 Agenda and, perhaps unsurprisingly, a very strong Latin America and Canadian focus, which correspond with my interest and nationality. Through connections in Brazil, I was able to meet with the Brazilian Undersecretary for Women and discuss continued efforts to eradicate gender-based violence in-country, especially in underserved urban regions. Unexpectedly, CSW also catalyzed an interest in urban spaces—issues I have long regarded as critical, but whose impacts on gender and women’s human rights I have only recently come to understand. Alongside this, upcoming and current “threat multipliers” to global crises such as climate change were a topic I pursued at CSW with much zeal.

Other issues of a more technical nature also came to the fore. For instance, during one of the High Level Panels, many subject-matter experts spoke about the extreme need of gender-dis-aggregated data in the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Highlighting the need for a “data revolution” in development that allows important stakeholders to make decisions



about their development without relying on the often manipulated data that emerges from the governments engaged on both sides of the development equation; donor and aid-recipient alike. Of further importance, of course, is actually *engaging* vulnerable populations like women and children in crafting decision-making processes within development that are empowerment. As Sharon Bhagwn-Rolls from Fiji put it so eloquently, “women have the right to *define* development, not merely to be the beneficiaries *of*.”

The subject areas I covered were of an incredibly diverse nature. Ranging from sessions analyzing Uruguay’s progress in reaching MDG 2 and 5 to a multimedia presentation that focused on “goddess iconography” throughout human history—the diversity was immense. This underscores CSW as a whole and probably the way each of us as advocates and activists has grown and changed. For the remainder of this reflection paper, I will comment on many of the disparate, yet unified, themes that I encountered throughout CSW58.

My CSW experience began with a bang. Immediately, we were thrust into an environment that can best be described as a college campus meets the organizing room of a bunch of grassroots activists. As a group, we attended NGO CSW—an independent event that mobilized the various NGOs in attendance and gave us a taste of many of the key priorities of CSW. We heard from Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the Executive Director of UN Women and former government minister from South Africa who emphasized women’s capacity for finding roles as conflict mediators and peacekeepers. To be quite frank, this was an element of gender equality I hadn’t truly considered; how does a government or society encourage women to mediate conflict and how does that manifest in tactile solutions to global



crises? As it turns out, UN Women has a three-pronged approach to this subject: first, women must *participate* in conflict prevention, then women must be involved in *protection* and finally, women must be empowered to play larger roles in *relief and recovery*. These perspectives challenged my preconceived and subconscious notions of what peacekeeping and peacemaking looked like and added a very valuable layer of subtext to my perception of global affairs.

Additionally, Phumzile also spoke to the Post-2015 Development Agenda—of great interest to me and my research—and talked about the need for a rights-based focus. Addressing the audience of change makers and activists, she posed a simple question “So what?” Whose lives will be impacted if we cannot come together and create an agenda that is bold and visionary—one that ends the structural causes of inequality? She also advocated broadly for the inclusion of targets and indicators imbedded in all elements of the Post-2015 addressing gender equality. I must say it was very empowering to hear the Executive Director of UN Women essentially deliver the thesis statement of my presentation and paper. It was validating and reaffirming to know that my research and perspective aligned closely with that of a respected and informed world leader. And, to add, she ended her speech by saluting the men in the room!

Additionally, NGO CSW introduced several other ideas of note. Jamina Djacta from UN-Habitat in New York called for a global evaluation of the economic costs of inequality, especially from an urban perspective. Calling attention to the fact that 7/10 people on this good earth will be urban dwellers by 2050, she highlighted the fact that women make up the majority of the urban poor, a population considered to be especially vulnerable. This



reminded me of my experiences with women who lived, worked and resided in the favelas or shantytowns that surround Rio de Janeiro and I found myself contemplating the resources that could be mobilized to facilitate their greater participation in local and national economies. Further, she touched on an issue that I have run across in pursuing my academic and professional interests in other realms: the feminization of poverty. Djacts called for a “fundamental rethinking of economic growth” with a focus on improving women’s role in global societies. In fact, shortly following Jamina’s address to NGO CSW, I was invited to attend UN-Habitat’s World Urban Forum (WUF7) in Medellín, Colombia. I am pleased to say that I am looking forward to discussing these topics in greater length in April 2014 as I travel to South America to continue the conversation!

Another striking element of CSW58 and indeed NGO CSW was the focus on reflecting on the successes and failures of the Beijing Platform for Action, which turns 20 next year. Passing through the conference rooms and UN venues for CSW58, it was empowering to know that many of the people in attendance had been trailblazers for equality at some of the most crucial historical junctions for the women’s rights movement. In many ways, it truly felt like we were standing on the shoulders of giants—a veritable Cedalion and Orion. In this regard, it was instructive to listen to the ideas and reflections of several thought leaders from Nepal, India, and the United States as they spoke to the need to raise a new generation of youth who respect women’s rights.

Further, what I found most fascinating, was a comment that was made by a panellist. Specifically, she confirmed a long held belief of mine, saying “When we’re frustrated with the United Nations, it is our responsibility as civil society to push governments and the United



Nations to do what it is we want them to do.” She recognized that, inherently, the UN is only as powerful as member governments allow it to be. This recognition does much to diffuse much of the criticism levied at the organization and allows conversations to transcend normative boundaries and instead focus on truer means of creating change. To this, a panellist highlighted that backlash should be seen as a sign of success—not failure. And, when women’s groups are not invited to have a seat at the proverbial table, it becomes incumbent upon the movement to analyze whether or not that table—“built of bones and blood”—is even worth sitting at. The panel introduced a host of valuable and introspective opinions that I will carry with me for the future.

In addition to many of the themes that were introduced at NGO CSW, I found myself developing a concerted emphasis on the role of men in promoting gender equality. Personally, I believe this was born from two realities: the first being my gender identity and the second was the realization that there were very few men present at CSW. Alongside other WomenNC participants, I attended many of the events that focused on men’s participation in preventing violence against women. Along the way, I was able to meet fascinating male leaders from places such as India and Brazil and connect with organizations such as MenEngage and Promundo that are doing important work to promote healthy masculinity in male-dominated societies. While it was great to hear about what many men are doing in their communities to prevent violence, the experience of attending many of the male-focused events also confirmed my decision *not* to focus on the role of men in preventing violence for my own research. In my perspective, it is important not to pigeonhole men as only being able to speak about the importance of violence prevention. As was highlighted



throughout CSW, men are needed as allies in a variety of spaces related to gender equality—gender-based violence, while incredibly cogent and relevant, is only one of those many spaces.

Beyond the events organized by NGOs, I found that attending the high level panels and observing the negotiations process was a fascinating addition to my CSW experience. For one, there was a very prominent Canadian governmental presence, which was interesting to me as a Canadian citizen. Second, it became one of my CSW goals to involve WomenNC in the negotiations to the greatest extent possible. In pursuing this, I learned a lot about the ways in which statements such as the *Agreed Conclusions* that are issued at the end of CSW are formed. Through a connection I made with a Brazilian NGO at CSW, I got WomenNC involved with a broad coalition of progressive organizations working to lobby governments and ensure several key areas of focus remained firmly entrenched in the draft documents (for instance, sexual and reproductive health rights). To this end, I was able to attend an internal UNFPA strategy meeting, where I connected with the agency's negotiators and listened as they highlighted many of the "red line" issues that were of particular sensitivity for countries deemed "the opposition." I learned a lot about how to galvanize support for key topics (i.e. a standalone goal on gender) and how to translate that support into supportive language in a draft document. I was able to contribute revisions and comments on the draft document in consultation with over 45 other NGOs and help ensure that the progressive agenda remained as robust as possible.



Beyond these events, there is much I could reflect on within this paper. I could speak to the interesting youth I met from other parts of the United States and abroad or the whacky sessions I attended on goddess iconography—including a theatrical performance by a woman who describes herself as a “living goddess.” But ultimately, the most important takeaway from CSW58 for me was hope. The hope of knowing that the movement for gender equality, despite remaining solely needed, is increasingly energized by the dual presence and voices of both young activists and experienced leaders. This is just the beginning of my own journey and I will forever look back at this experience as a milestone therein.