



### **CSW Reflections Paper - Spring Break Global Immersion**

**Alison Domonoske**

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From March 7 to March 15, 2015, I joined six other WomenNC 2015 Fellows to attend the 59<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) at the United Nations headquarters in New York City. From the moment we first walked into the building I was in awe of the global representation of members at the meeting, the sheer variety of topics we were exposed to, and the promise of gathering so many activists and government leaders. Throughout my time I attended 20+ events alongside 9,000 other women's human rights defenders. Undoubtedly, this experience taught me many valuable lessons, including respect and admiration for the older generation of women's rights activists, the understanding that change is often slow, the recognition of the need for structural change and more on my topic of women and the economy. My CSW experience will continue to affect my life; it showed me the many different career possibilities in working with foreign policy and instilled in me confidence in myself and the importance of my own work. Finally, I returned from CSW inspired to bring what I learned back to North Carolina. I am excited to put the global-to-local model into practice, convinced of the importance of engaging my own community, I want to inspire and involve others, especially young people, and I believe one key aspect of this is questioning our own convictions.

I learned many lessons at the CSW meeting; importantly from the examples of older women's rights leaders like Bella Abzug, I learned about the frustrations often faced in the movement and about the difference between Band-Aids and structural change. One influential event I went to was hosted at the Roosevelt House to honor the life of pioneering US lawmaker Bella Abzug. At this event, 2014 Fellow Isabella Higgins and I learned about Abzug's tireless efforts in the House of Representatives, founding the group Women's Environment and Development Organization and working even as an older woman at the Beijing Conference. Her spirit was infectious—we learned of her life from those close to her including her daughter, the current President of Ms. magazine and other women's rights pioneers.



Throughout the week, I encountered many amazing women who had dedicated their lives to furthering women's rights, which encouraged me to stay optimistic and continue their lifelong dedication and work. I also learned that change is slow—though the Beijing Platform for Action was passed 20 years ago, much change still has not occurred. People are working tirelessly within this framework to celebrate previous improvements but also push to continue to realize the promise of Beijing. I also learned that many organizations face the tension of solving structural issues or bringing about short-term “Band-Aid” solutions. What I refer to as “Band-Aid” solutions are more on-the-ground remedies for everyday injustices people face, while structural issues address the policies that lead to human rights violations. One example from a panel I attended lies in environmental issues; following the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill a “Band-Aid” solution was providing counseling and aid to those workers and families affected by the spill, while a structural solution was working to get tougher legislation passed for oil companies and even working to reduce US dependence on fossil fuels. I believe both are important, and that successful NGO and government participation must address both short-term and long-term structural problems. Unfortunately, I don't have a great model for this difficult balancing act.

An important aspect of my learning process was learning more about the focus of my research: Women and the Economy. I attended an inspiring session sponsored by the AFL-CIO where I learned from Bangladeshi garment workers and the International Domestic Workers Foundation. This further cemented my commitment to overturning unjust labor and power relations, raising awareness for the workers on whom we all depend, and advocating for fair and equitable work for all. I learned many important lessons at the CSW meeting, and I know all of these will have a great personal impact on my future going forward.

Attending the CSW meeting was a pivotal moment in my life—it amplified my conception of job possibilities and gave me confidence in my own voice and the importance of my contributions and leadership in the world. First, viewing the different panels composed of government representatives, journalists, NGO workers and others showed me diverse ways to be involved in human rights and foreign policy. This expanded my ideas for the future. While I previously imagined myself working in the government, I now understand the important role that NGOs and organizations like the UN play in influencing policy. Now, I don't



feel confined to working through government channels to influence foreign affairs, women's rights or human rights—I know that I can build a career in many different ways to further this goal.

Through gaining invaluable connections with employees at the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center, leaders in the Cities for CEDAW movement and other young activists I expanded my network and understanding of how others work within women's human rights. Now, as I continue my job search, I plan to look more into global and US-based NGO's and better appreciate the role of research throughout the process of creating and analyzing policy. Furthermore, the entire experience gave me much greater self-confidence and belief in the importance of my own work. As we presented in front of 80+ people, I felt my words, research and the lessons learned from North Carolina really had an impact on our audience and that they appreciated our voices. Throughout the week, I continually heard the need for the involvement of young women and our leadership—I realized that the actions I take can impact the world and the importance of my own voice. While this might be more representative of my own self-doubt, I previously did not think that many of my choices were very consequential to the world around me, but now I want to take responsibility for improving our community and make sure my actions and concerns are heard and taken seriously.

Related to improving our community, the CSW meeting really motivated me to bring back everything I learned to North Carolina. Many at the UN discussed the importance of local action in building a global movement—equally important is bringing the global home to the local. I am excited to bring back all my lessons learned and I hope I can educate and inspire many to become advocates for women's human rights. I especially hope I can spread this message to UNC students, where many students are active in social justice movements but may not be aware of the possibilities available to them in working and learning from the United Nations. Part of the global to local action, I hope, will be continuing to question and challenge our own deeply held convictions. I know that at the CSW all fellows faced views we did not agree with, maybe even ideas that we had never heard before. For example, Liv was surprised when some panelists critiqued our capitalist system in the US and its effects on women around the world. I hope that in our global to local action I can bring similar challenges to the North Carolina community. I know it is often hard for us to question our own culture, but I believe this is an important part of any societal change, especially within the realm of women's human rights. I hope I can ask audiences difficult questions, forcing us to recognize the flaws of our



own understanding and bringing this critical view to local audiences. The important creation of this critical view were the many panelists I heard who critiqued specific aspects of US domestic and foreign policy we may take for granted and critiqued dominant cultural narratives in the US. For example, I attended an excellent panel on women in the Arab world resisting conflict and one of the main messages of the panel was the need for American audiences to stop viewing Arab women as victims. The US media and policymakers often use the situation of Arab women as reasoning for military interventions in the Middle East; the speakers were pushing back against this idea and calling for a recognition of the power and work that Arab women are engaged in to express and assert themselves as agents of change, rather than as passive victims. There were many other examples of this critical view, which I hope I can bring back to North Carolina and our discourse surrounding women's human rights—there certainly is more than enough work we must do in this state to further women's rights and opportunities for us to act in solidarity with women around the world, rather than elevating our own voices above anyone else's.

In conclusion, CSW was one of the most educational weeks of my life. I was inspired by the examples of older women's activists and learned much about the difficulties in bringing about change. I return galvanized to continue work on women's human rights and with a broader conception of a possible future career, most importantly I now have much greater confidence in my own voice and my own work. Finally, I fully understand the importance of bringing these lessons back to North Carolina and hope that my experience will motivate others to get involved in this work. I know that I will continue to practice gender mainstreaming<sup>1</sup> in my own life—incorporating a concern for the broad range of women's human rights in all aspects of my work and personal life, thanks to this experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Gender mainstreaming is normally applied in the policy arena. It describes incorporating gender concerns in all aspects of policy.