



CSW Reflections Paper

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Through my time participating in the WomenNC fellowship program, I have been able to acquire a wealth of knowledge about the issues that face women on the local, national, and global scale, especially in relation to my topic of sexual education. I had the great privilege and honor of attending the 59th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York City where the focus was placed on how far we have progressed in the twenty years since the passage of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995. Throughout the week, governmental organizations and NGOs held sessions addressing parts of the Beijing Platform for Action and examining both the progress we have made as well as discussing how far we have yet to go. The topics ranged from sexual education in France to promoting women's activism in Iran to addressing sex trafficking in India. Throughout the week I was able to meet amazing activists and hear about how they have been fighting for gender equality all over the world. It was truly inspirational. Attending CSW was an amazing, unforgettable experience that helped cultivate my passion for the fight for gender equality, increase my awareness of issues that affect women worldwide, and direct my future goals and career plans.

My research with WomenNC pertained to sex education as both a means to prevent sexual assault as well as to provide a better world for survivors of sexual violence where they feel comfortable coming forward to report what happened to them. The current focus on abstinence education both teaches women that is shameful to have sex (thus telling others it is okay to shame women who choose to have sex), which makes it hard for survivors of sexual assault to come forward because they fear they will be blamed for what happened to them. At the same time, abstinence education is fundamentally antithetical to consent education – teaching people about how to ask for consent when engaging in sexual activity. Consent based education could help prevent sexual assaults from happening by educating people and making sure that perpetrators know what constitutes sexual assault. I was so



excited by all the research that I conducted – and also disturbed by the lack of conversation about abstinence education in the national arena.

One of the most exciting parts of CSW for me was a session that France sponsored all about sex education. We were all given handouts that France gives to new parliament members – the essence of which was, “Congratulations on being elected: here is what young people want.” The pamphlet was all about how the government needs to empower youth to make their own choices about their sexuality, emphasizing that it isn't the government's responsibility to tell kids not to have sex, but that *it is* the government's responsibility to provide youth with the information that they need about sex, including teaching about contraception and encouraging people to actively make their own sexual choices about their bodies. The panel, which also included representatives from Australia and Germany, talked at length about how "silence on sex kills." This panel echoed a lot of recently released reports about Ontario's reform of sexual education to include consent-based education, and Britain which is now also beginning to have this conversation. I was so heartened by the fact that France was taking steps to provide young people with what they need. Unsurprisingly, other developed countries, not the U.S., are taking the lead on reforming sexual education. I hope that the U.S. can follow in their footsteps and have a conversation about the dangers of abstinence education.

While this was the only session that focused exclusively on talking about sexual education reform, many of the other sessions talked about components of sexual education, such as educating populations about sexual violence and working to provide women with access to reproductive care. Hearing women from all over the world stand in solidarity on the issue of giving women the agency to protect their bodies and educating men to help prevent their committing acts of violence was inspirational. We are all committed to the same issue. Attending these sessions and hearing from other women only reaffirmed my desire to keep fighting for sexual education reform – and to be able to do it in the context of the progress other nations are making as well as the nations that still have abysmal resources.



At CSW I also had the privilege of hearing about a range of issues that were outside of my research on sexual education. One of the issues I learned a lot about was sex work. I had always been conflicted about my views on sex work because while I believe that a woman has the fundamental right to decide what to do with her body, I think that a lot of prostitution is coerced and is a profession that women would not otherwise choose if they had the freedom not to. And, as one of the amazing people I met named Ruchira Gupta pointed out, sex work is very closely tied to sex trafficking. Ruchira was a reporter in India and did a story on sex trafficking, which led her to do a documentary exposing the injustices that many trafficked and prostituted women have faced. Her work with the documentary led her to found an NGO that works with trafficked women. She focused on how we need to make policy that supports "the last girl" - the last girl who is left marginalized and oppressed. It reminded me that all my work studying sex-positive education requires a certain level of privilege: that women can choose with whom to have sex and when to have sex.

I had the privilege of hearing Ruchira speak several times throughout the week, including on a panel that focused specifically on sex trafficking and prostitution, arguing that by criminalizing the purchase (but not the sale) of sex workers you can eliminate sex trafficking and prostitution by decreasing the demand. Ruchira argued that we need to criminalize the brothel keepers, the johns, and the pimps, but not the prostitutes. This criminalizes the purchasing of prostitution without criminalizing the women (and men) who sell sex. This was a new viewpoint for me, and one that fits with my belief that women have the right to sell their bodies, but that no one has the right to buy them, which is the Swedish model. A spokesperson for the Swedish government noted that since this model has been in place, prostitution has decreased dramatically. I loved that CSW was able to open up this debate for me.

In addition to sex trafficking, I was able to attend many panels and events on a wide range of issues. I learned about the challenges in maternal health care. I learned about how access to sanitary products is critical in making sure girls stay in school. I learned about how we can use international law to counter gender violence and hate speech. I met so many incredible people and I became close with the



other fellows on the trip as we went to events together. I loved that CSW opened my eyes to all the other issues that women are dealing with on a world scale.

Attending CSW, and being part of the entire WomenNC fellowship, has helped give me a better idea of what I want to do with my life. I always struggled with how to mesh my major at Duke – international relations and national security concerns – with concerns for humanitarian issues. I felt at times frustrated at CSW because there was very little conversation about national security and U.S. national interest, which is a critical part in addressing why the U.S. does not have a great track record on gender issues. By ignoring this part of the conversation, there is not much way to move forward, despite all the wonderful work that NGOs have done.

I see a very direct link between U.S. national security and interests and humanitarian concerns, especially women's rights: it is in the interest of the U.S. to have a more stable world. There is a growing body of evidence that states with gender equality are significantly less likely to have internal armed conflict than states with high rates of gender violence.¹ Despite this evidence, women's humanitarian concerns are so often absent in the national security/foreign policy dialogue. I now am making a concerted effort to bring up women's humanitarian concerns in my classes and the foreign policy events that I attend. Foreign policy circles, even at Duke, are very male dominated, resulting in the lack of conversation that includes women. This just translates to the national level in an even more extreme way: there are so few women in the national security sector. Thanks to CSW, I am now actively pursuing the discussion of women's humanitarian concerns in national security, and I am committed to making these discussions part of the mainstream dialogue. I'm planning to write my senior thesis on this exact issue, and I am hoping to be able to continue my research about the importance of women's humanitarian concerns in foreign policy over the summer in my internship with the Truman Institute.

¹ Melander, Erik. "Gender Equality and Intrastate Armed Conflict." *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (December 2005): 695-714.

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WomenNC has been a truly wonderful experience. I learned how to conduct research, how to pursue a topic I was passionate about, how to give speeches that interest and win the hearts and minds of the people I am speaking with, and meet wonderfully passionate people. I have learned so much, and I feel like WomenNC has really equipped me with the tools I need moving forward to continue the conversation of advancing women's human rights.

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