



CSW Reflections Paper

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I had the privilege of attending the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) at the United Nations during the week of March 9th with WomenNC. This was my first time attending CSW and I did not know what to expect. CSW exceeded any expectations I could have had and I feel honored that I was able to take part in a global initiative dedicated to achieving equality for women everywhere. I will explain several aspects of my trip to NY for the Commission on the Status of Women including common themes I witnessed, the impact of CSW on my career goals, how CSW inspired me, the frustrations I had during the week, and my preferred sessions.

I attended many meetings during CSW which included side events in which governmental officials led and parallel events which were dedicated to non-governmental organizations. One of the main issues expressed at most, if not all, of the meetings (both governmental and non-governmental) was the difficulty of implementation. From events devoted to empowering rural women to reach food and nutrition security to events committed to women in political leadership attaining equality in political decision-making, they all raised concerns for the problems they face in implementation. It is wonderful to have ideas that will advance the women's rights movement but there needs to be action. Without action, there will never be progress. My experience at CSW has been vital to say the least but we have to make sure to follow through on everything discussed. Having thousands of people from all walks of life and from all corners of the globe shows the diversity associated with this movement. We should not take this gathering for granted by not acting on all of the issues we covered throughout the week.

I am a graduate student at North Carolina State University pursuing a Master of International Studies with a focus on US/Middle East relations. I am a dual citizen of Egypt and America. I have lived in the United States for my entire life and spend summers in Egypt to visit my extended family. My Arab American identity implores me to build a bridge between the two very different regions of the world. Inevitably the cultural differences spark issues between the two countries. I aspire to be a leading force



in establishing a stronger and more enhanced relationship between the Middle East and the United States. Living in America, I have experienced racism and ignorance about my culture including my appearance as a Muslim woman. Many people of my community have the wrong impression about the Middle East and, similarly, many people in the Middle East have negative notions of the United States. With the knowledge and skills I hope to gain by completing a graduate degree in international studies, I strive to serve as a positive representation of both nations and at the same time, work to bring my two homes together. I aim to achieve my career goals of working within the United Nations as a Human Resource or Political Affairs Officer, or for the US State Department as a Civil Service Officer. What I love about my time at CSW is that it only motivated me more to accomplish my goals because there were many events discussing women in the Arab world.

Many of the events focused on Arab women and how they're affected because of the conflicts in the region. I met many passionate members of NGOs who are fighting for issues that are very dear to my heart. The parallel event on the impact of war and conflict on women consisted of three Arab women on the panel. One woman is Palestinian, one Bahraini, and the third Egyptian. All three women have experienced trials and hardships within the instability of the Middle East. Maryam, who is from Bahrain, explained that writing a CEDAW Shadow Report caused the women who were working on it to be tortured and imprisoned. Azza, the Egyptian woman, told us the story of a young woman who was killed last month when she was on her way to Tahrir Square to lay flowers in peaceful solidarity. She left behind a young son. This woman came from the same neighborhood in Alexandria, Egypt that my dad grew up in. The funeral took place on the same street where he grew up in the community's Mosque. What's even more unbelievable is the fact that the woman was pro-Sisi (the latest Egyptian regime) and was still killed by police. Afaf, the Palestinian woman, told us a quote from a Palestinian mother she knew which will stay with me for as long as I live. The mother said, "All I want is to not feel that I might not see my child again when I send him off to school." All of their stories were truly heartbreaking but nothing new to me. I applaud them for also having the courage to discuss the double standards of the United Nations when it comes to different conflicts while presenting at the United Nations. The fact that



they emphasized their dissatisfaction with the rescue narrative that is oftentimes placed on Arab women was also very much commended. Arab women do have the strength and commitment to achieve gender equality; all women have the ability to make a change.

Seeing women from countries all over the world, from all walks of life, gathered together to fight for everything they believe in was an inspiration in itself. I consider myself to be blessed to have been able to meet many of them, to have been able to hear their stories. Oftentimes, we take what we have for granted. A film screening we attended, titled *Difret*, made such a huge impact on everyone who attended. The film was made to educate everyone about early child marriage and what can be done to stop it. The film was based on a true story of Aberash's life. Aberash is an Ethiopian woman who was abducted as a child and managed to escape. Aberash was at the film screening and spoke on the panel after the panel was over. The film was incredibly well done and will surely make an impact on all who watch it. To see what many girls all over the world go through in terms of early marriage and even abductions is hard to witness to say the least. Several events that I attended had women who traveled a long way to get to CSW to be heard, to change their own realities. These women were so brave and I was in awe of all of them, especially those who had such strength and determination. They are living testaments of the horrors women face on a daily basis no matter what country they came from. Another inspiration to me, and I'm sure to many others as well, was the strong voice of the youth. One moment during the session discussing women and girls' health in Kenya with the first lady of Kenya was very great to witness. A young Kenyan girl, at the age of fifteen, raised her hand to make a comment at the end. She was confident and poised. She stated that first and foremost, education is a priority for girls and women. She then proceeded to bring a bracelet symbolizing the fight for education and equality to the first lady of Kenya and put on her arm. This moment illustrated the capability and significance of the youth. We need to listen to the younger generations because they have so much to offer.

I only had one frustration with CSW and it did not have to do with the content of the sessions. Whenever each event ended, there would always be time for questions from the audience to the panelists. At every single event that I attended, most of the people who stood up to raise questions gave



a short presentation rather than asking a question. Many of them would talk about their own organizations or even just speak about their own opinions and beliefs. While I appreciate all the diverse opinions, I would have appreciated there to be actual questions. There were many others who had actual questions who did not get to ask their questions because of the length of time those attendees took when addressing the panelists. There is a time and place to network or to even share an opinion but not when there are significant questions that need to be addressed.

I surprisingly preferred the NGO parallel sessions more than the governmental side events. This surprised me because my career goals are more oriented towards governmental work rather than non-governmental work. It was not that I did not like the governmental sessions. On the contrary, I enjoyed them very much. However, the non-governmental gatherings were more personal and it was significantly easier to have conversations with the panelists afterwards. Additionally, because governmental organizations tend to have more power than non-governmental organizations, I believe it is really important to have the non-governmental organizations heard at CSW.

Overall, it was a week I will never forget. I am incredibly grateful for WomenNC for giving me this opportunity which will undoubtedly influence my future aspirations. Not only will I work to bring the Middle East and the United States together, but I will also work to bring about equality for all women. Equality for women will influence all aspects of life not only within politics but also with social issues. I firmly believe that the issues we see concerning women throughout the world are hindering the progress of our worldwide society even between the Middle East and the United States. I will continue working for equality and I will use what I learned throughout the week at CSW as I complete my Master's degree and within my future career.