



CSW Reflections Paper

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Attending the 59th United States Commission on the Status of Women was an incredible experience – the other WomenNC fellows and I had the opportunity to mingle with government officials, nongovernmental activists, and women’s rights advocates from around the world.

Throughout the week, I attended events on a variety of topics, from youth activism and violence against women to sexual health and trans* advocacy. Each of these was illuminating and inspiring in its own way, but I found myself continually drawn to the sessions relating to mental health.

My favorite session of the week was the first one I attended, which explored women’s mental health in the post-2015 global agenda. The panelists covered an array of topics, from the impact of interpersonal violence to the mental health issues typically experienced by survivors of human trafficking. Between each presentation there was a performance – these ranged from talented vocal performances to classical Indian dance and instrumental performances by people playing traditional Chinese instruments. Each performer was absolutely mesmerizing, and provided a great opportunity to breathe between academic panels.

One of the panelists, Dr. Yvette Rafferty, does exactly the kind of work I would like to do one day. Dr. Rafferty uses her PhD in Psychology to explore the mental health effects of human rights violations. She has performed extensive ethnographic research with a number of marginalized populations, including homeless persons, people living with HIV/AIDS, refugees, and survivors of human trafficking.

Afterwards, I sought her out, and ended up having a great conversation that continued even as we walked out of the Armenian Center together onto 2nd Avenue. I told her about my interest in using mental health interventions to combat the psychosocial impacts of discrimination, stigmatization, and persecution, and she suggested that I check out the Psychology PhD program at Pace University (in New York City), where she teaches courses and conducts research. Pace’s program includes a center devoted to queer mental health – one of the only such initiatives in the United States. Dr. Rafferty



insisted that I attend her talk on Thursday, and also promised that she would make every effort to come during our own presentations on Wednesday. “Even if I can’t make it,” she said, “I’ll encourage my students to go.” This interaction exemplified the sorts of connections I hoped to make during my time at CSW. Because global mental health is a relatively tiny field, it felt amazing to find someone with such similar interests and passions, and to engage in a genuine and productive conversation with her.

When I attended Dr. Rafferty’s presentation on Thursday, I had the opportunity to talk to her in even greater depth. She told me she regularly collaborates with Dr. Alex Cohen, one of my mental health heroes. Dr. Cohen is the course director of the program in Global Mental Health at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. The Centre for Global Mental Health is unique in its focus on international mental health and human rights. Despite increasing evidence concerning the global burden of mental illness and lack of mental health services for much of the world’s population, the topic of global mental health has not been taken up by most institutions of public health research. Dr. Cohen’s program is the only one of its kind.

This connection is one of the most exciting I had the chance to make during our week in New York. When I grow up, I want to be Dr. Cohen. He’s an anthropologist who, according to his website, is interested in “models of community mental health services and sociocultural and environmental influences on the mental health of populations.” The work he does is ethnographic in nature: he collects people’s stories, and performs case studies, and writes about them in an almost journalistic fashion that illuminates broader truths about the experiences of the mentally ill. His focus is diverse – Dr. Cohen spent a year documenting the lives of homeless mentally ill persons living in the Skid Row district of Los Angeles, and he’s currently developing community-based interventions to prevent depression among older adults in India and conducting research on psychosis in Nigeria and Trinidad. This type of work is so incredibly exciting to me – working at the intersections of mental health, activism, research, community advocacy, and human rights is my dream. Interacting with Dr. Rafferty, and learning more about the work of Dr. Cohen, was one of the most valuable aspects of my week at CSW because it gave me a clearer idea of how I might break into this field someday myself.



Besides the several panels I attended on mental health, I also sought out events on unfamiliar topics, including sessions on Palestine, maternal health, challenges for women in the Arab world, and youth activism.

One of the most interesting experiences at CSW was the question and answer sessions that happened after every talk. The other fellows and I noticed that almost every question that was posed to presenters had some kind of ulterior motive – mostly to further an agenda or promote an organization. At the international mental health talk I attended on Monday, I was surprised to hear a young woman ask a clearly rehearsed question about the effects of abortion on mental health – despite the fact that the panel had nothing to do with abortion. She read a lengthy description of a research study that claimed to find negative psychological outcomes in women who have recently had an abortion, and asked if abortion providers shouldn't be responsible for talking about these outcomes with women before they are allowed to undergo the procedure. It was a bizarre experience – it seems as though the young woman picked a random panel with the phrase “mental health” and sat through a presentation she probably didn't care about simply for the opportunity to ask a question whose answer she seemed already to have decided.

Perhaps my favorite experience occurred when I accompanied Beth and Mina to an event at the Ms. Foundation in which about a dozen organizers and activists – most of whom were representing various feminist organizations based in California – met to write a response to the response statement 700 NGOs made to the UN's statement from CSW. We were able to make several suggestions – including the importance of including men and boys in conversations about gender equality and including protections for gender protection, sexual orientation, and all forms of gender identity. As I mentioned during my presentation, it's crucial, on a global scale, that trans* rights are enshrined in human rights law.

When the Beijing Platform for Action was introduced in 1995, it was the first international document to provide protections for so-called “sexual rights,” including rights relating to women's reproductive health and sexuality. The Platform's authors also wanted to include protections for sexual orientation and gender identity – protections which would cover the entirety of the LGBTQ spectrum,



including trans* people. Unfortunately, conservative pushback was so intense that these protections were dropped just before publication. However, the Beijing Platform paved the way for LGBTQ rights to be addressed on an international scale, and the last twenty years have seen significant progress. But many feminist activists argue that the language of the Platform and CEDAW should be broadened to include these protections.

After the Ms. Foundation roundtable, I had the opportunity to attend an actual writing session, where, over a two hour period, a group of representatives and I sat down and crafted the document itself. It was incredible to be involved in something that had the potential to impact international law, and also to see firsthand how the process of changing human rights law plays out in real time.

At a session I attended on transilience – the resilience of trans* people - I met several representatives from the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC). IGLHRC was founded 25 years ago and is considered one of the leading human rights organizations dedicated to ending discrimination and abuse on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. IGLHRC works with the United Nations, regional human rights monitoring bodies, and other partners to document violations that occur against LGBT people around the globe and work to protect LGBT people from discrimination and abuse. One of the people I met at the transilience presentation, Ashton Giese, is a development associate at IGLHRC. Ashton and I had the opportunity to talk at length, and he let me know that his company is looking for recent college graduates to work in outreach positions – and, having seen my presentation on trans* suicide prevention, informally offered me one of these positions if I decide to move up to NYC at any point – which is insane, and so amazing.

Our experience at CSW was a truly life-changing one. In addition to learning a ton about women's rights issues and work that's being done around the globe in the fight for equality, getting to interact with activists who are doing incredible work was so inspiring. I am so thankful to Beth, Isabella, Lois, and everyone at WomenNC who helped us along the way.