



Addressing UN Beijing Platform for Action Goal 3: Women and Health

The Importance of Funding and Supporting Independent Reproductive Health Clinics

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Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): Article 12

“1. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, access to health care services, including those related to family planning”

(United Nations, 1).



It is hard to put into words the complex range of emotions I have regarding my experience at CSW—primarily because it is still difficult for me to wrap my brain around the fact that I was able to attend. Never did I imagine in entering my undergraduate university career that there would exist an opportunity of this caliber—an opportunity I would be chosen for and given reign to command. While WomenNC certainly provided a mold from which to operate in preparing to attend CSW, and helped guide my research and eventual presentation, our time as Fellows at the physical Commission was largely left to our own planning. Any initial hesitance I had regarding the *largeness* of the Commission vanished the moment I entered the United Nations building. I truly believe that confidence within me that lasted the entire duration of the week stemmed from such excellent coaching on behalf of the WomenNC team—but also from the nature of the Fellowship itself.

Prior to arriving at CSW, even following months of research and public speaking training, I still maintained some serious trepidation regarding the operations of the United Nations in relation to tangible, implemented change. I envisioned rooms full of people arguing over minute word differences in dusty human rights treaties that spanned hundreds of pages and did little for those currently suffering from injustices of all kinds the world over. I was unsure of my role in such a gathering of human rights officials, lawmakers, peacemakers, and activists as a nineteen year old with pipe dreams of someday working for the United Nations, despite my reservations. Though I knew the United Nations gathered, managed, and sponsored NGO work all over the world, I still envisioned the UN as being more like a massive think tank, and less like a constantly evolving evaluation of work in progress. It was with this sense of uncertainty about the Commission, coupled with my exhilaration at the chance to explore women's human rights at the United Nations firsthand, that I began my week of sessions.

Following a weekend of registrations, hurried meals, and jostling taxi rides, the Commission formally opened on Monday, March 9th, 2015. After a night of determining what sessions I wanted to



attend, I weaved my way through crowds of tourists and eager international visitors to slip into the pass-holders security line to enter the United Nations. It was there in that line, as I removed my jacket and metal jewelry for screening, that I felt as though I was viewing myself from an external lens, outside of my own body: I saw a college student at ease with her surroundings amongst hundreds of more experienced individuals, ready to cross into the gates of the United Nations and take in every last amount of knowledge available to be obtained. It was with this sense of peace regarding the opportunity that awaited me that I got to work at my first session, inside of the Economic and Social Council chamber that looked exactly as I had always imagined a UN chamber would, right down to the microphones.

This first session was important to me not only because it was the first of my week, but also because of the topic: sexual education as a human right, as presented by representatives from France detailing success in their governmental programs relating to youth advocacy and youth sex education. While I had every intent of choosing most of my sessions relating to topics I didn't know much about (in an attempt to take advantage of speakers I may never have access to again) I chose the French session specifically to have a point of true comparison for the United States sexual education curriculum which is, at best, highly varied and unprofessional in its design and implementation (or lack thereof). As my research and presentation topic was focused specifically on reproductive healthcare, I was curious to hear explanations from a country with a decidedly "liberal" approach to reproductive healthcare about what comprehensive sexual health education for both primary and secondary state students has done for infant mortality rates, the teenage birth rate, and instances of abortion. While it was refreshing to hear many of the same statistics I used in my research repeated in the session, it was similarly disheartening to see the ever widening gap between other Western approaches to sexual health and the United States. As my research did not delve deeply into the idea of comprehensive sexual health as a component of inclusive reproductive healthcare, the session felt very much like the missing link of my work. I left the session



more convinced than ever that if there was any sort of “common core” education needed across the United States, it was for sex education.

On the bright and sunny Tuesday morning of our week at CSW, I walked into the Armenian Church center, intending to attend a session advertised as a discussion of women’s resistance against *daesh*-controlled region (*daesh* is the term used by many to describe the so-called Islamic State, or ISIL, because they feel that invoking the word “Islam” makes it seem as though the Muslim faith approves of their independent terrorist actions). However, upon arrival, the speaker announced that the discussion would be focused instead on Palestinian women—an announcement that immediately caused many in the room to stand up angrily and press for the door. This was disheartening to see in person on multiple levels. While I certainly cannot claim to be an expert on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, nor will I take a partisan stance in this paper, the panel was not about politics—it was about women. Regardless of the minute details of disagreements between governments and the tangled web of both US interest and general religious investment in either side, real women and children suffer in the face of endless conflict. To their credit, the women of this panel pressed on against the absence of many bodies in the room, and detailed many of the ways Palestinian women currently living in occupied territory are working to improve their status in education, healthcare, and economics. While I thoroughly enjoyed the panel, in many ways, this was the lowest point of CSW for me. Seeing so much personal political belief getting in the way of creating aid or change, and causing so many to turn away from the room or stay simply to heckle the panelists at the end with irrelevant and purposely venomously-charged questions was incredibly disheartening. This is the true hindrance to progress in humanitarian crisis—personal divisions. In many ways, I had idealistically expected attendants at CSW to be far beyond such pedantic political allegiances, but I was proven wrong. Still, it was a valuable lesson to learn—even at the highest level of



communities coming together from across the globe to discuss the status of women, at a place created to unite rather than divide, politics are still politics.

In the vein of Arab women in conflict zones, I attended a session discussing the reproductive rights of women in places deemed to be in the midst of severe political turmoil and crisis, with a focus on Syria. One of the panelists, Jomana Qaddour, a native Syrian and Al-Jazeera correspondent, spoke at length about the compromise of reproductive freedom in the midst of war. Directly discussing Syria, she discussed witnessing firsthand the caesarean delivery of a woman in a hospital with no electricity, and no anesthetic. The child, who did not survive the birth, was delivered prematurely with only a knife and a towel for the mother to bite down on in agony during the procedure. Such conditions are typical in Syria, even in the cities still holding out against *daesh*. Aside from being the type of information I had only been marginally exposed to, and sheltered from in my university classes, it gave me an entirely new angle on reproductive healthcare I had yet to consider. As a passionate reproductive rights advocate, I had yet to consider the reality of reproductive rights, or lack thereof, in conflict zones. Coming out of this session, and others like it, I felt incredibly lucky to be able to expand my knowledge and interests beyond US reproductive issues and into community based approaches abroad.

In terms of community-based approaches, I believe that was one of the most consistent sentiments I saw expressed at CSW—in a wide variety of panels. Women spoke, from a variety of backgrounds, about spurning the “savior narrative” typically espoused by well-intentioned Western NGO and charity organizations. More often than not, women the world over have the strength and desire to change their situations—they just lack certain resources or currently exist in conditions (like violent conflict) that lie outside of their control. Instead of imposing organizational aid in a manner tantamount to saying, “we know best”, NGOs (and United Nations projects) should strive to support systems already in place by those living in the area of critical concern. That is true empowerment.

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Beyond the sessions I attended, having the opportunity to speak on a panel was, quite frankly, the most exciting thing I have done thus far in my life, and exceeded all expectations of what I believed I was capable of. All at once, the WomenNC session was the most uplifting and humbling day of my life, and seeing the audience react to the words I was speaking gave me a sense that I don't just have a voice—I have a powerful one. To that end, I will never be able to properly express my debt to Beth, Isabella, the entire WomenNC board, and every single donor for making this trip a reality.

Looking toward the future, I am most certainly committed to someday working for the United Nations, but I would like to devote time to an NGO relating to reproductive healthcare first. Thanks to the incredibly informative Syrian session I attended, I am giving serious thought to reproductive healthcare in crisis zones—and while I'm not one hundred percent sure of where I will end up, women's rights will remain my focus. For now, I have joined the Cities for CEDAW committee team right here in Raleigh, in the hopes of seeing CEDAW ratified at the local level here in my own community. I couldn't imagine doing anything else after coming back from CSW—and I am so excited to see where this opportunity might lead me. Once again, I thank the whole of WomenNC for giving my voice power and a platform—and for the once-in-a-lifetime experience that has hopefully set me up for many more.