



CSW60: March 14-24, 2016 Women's empowerment and its link to sustainable development

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Louise McLeod

Women Graduates-USA / Graduate Women International
VGIF

CSW 60: Leave no one behind

Each year in March, the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) turns the focus of the United Nations towards women and gender related issues worldwide. (<http://www.ngocsw.org/>) NGO CSW/NY provides an opportunity for civil society to participate through a forum where activists from around the world can discuss issues pertaining to women and girls, to network, share strategies and to lobby governments to implement resolutions and treaties. It also provides a safe place for women where their voice can be heard. This is especially important for those who do not, or cannot, have a voice in their own communities.

The principal output of CSW is the agreed conclusions on the priority theme for that year with a set of concrete recommendations for governments, intergovernmental bodies and other institutions, along with civil society actors (NGOs) to be implemented at the international, national, regional and local level. (<http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/outcomes>). While at CSW, NGOs are encouraged to contact and

appeal to their national delegations to implement the needs of the women and girls they represent in order to have the strongest outcome document possible to advance the goals of the current theme. In addition, the Commission also adopts a number of resolutions.

The CSW theme key word, **sustainable development**, relates to the **17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** adopted on September 25th, 2015 to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all as part of the new sustainable development agenda for the next 15 years (the 2030 agenda). These SDGs will replace the 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, 2000-2015). These goals will only be reached if everyone does their part; governments, the private sector, civil society and all of us as individuals.

At the heart of the SDGs is **Goal 5, Gender Equality: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls**. None of the other 16 goals will be attained if we do not have gender equity, and women will not be empowered unless they have equal access to health care and education, and can take part in political and economic decision-making. Women and girls continue to suffer discrimination and violence in every part of the world. Gender equality is a fundamental human right and necessary for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. (<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>)

As a delegate for two NGOs (VGIF and Graduate Women International), I attended the opening Consultative Day events, morning briefings, the Europe/North America caucus, side events and mission-related parallel sessions of my choice during the first week of CSW 60.

The overall take away phrases from the first week of sessions are **'leave no one behind'** and **'implementation, implementation, implementation.'** Consultation Day speakers emphasized that civil society must ensure that we 'leave no one behind' as we pursue the 2030 agenda. If someone is left behind, it will be a woman, a woman who will have no access to proper health care, education or reproductive rights. Civil society is pivotal to making sure that no one is left behind because it is the sector that has the most access to the population it serves and should pay attention to the gaps and challenges, monitoring and denouncing those agencies and governments that are not willing to advance these goals. The call to action for civil society to strengthen the 2030 agenda is clear.

CSW Sessions on Migration, Women, Peace and Security

The world's population is on the move with one of the largest human migration since the second World War. More than 60 million people around the globe are displaced either by conflict, war, hunger or natural disasters putting a tremendous strain on resources. More than half of the world's displaced people are women and children and they suffer the most from sexual exploitation and violence, hunger and poverty, lack of basic education and health care. The average length of displacement is 17 years. 90% of displaced people worldwide do not live in refugee camps but in communities where they have no access to services provided by refugee camps such as health care and education.

In a high level panel on Safety for Migrant Women and Girls, the question of protection for the human rights of women and girls was discussed. As an example, what are the moral and legal responsibilities of a

country with laws in place that are already broken by virtue of their own customs when refugees arrive on your doorstep ? What do you do when the legal age of marriage is 18 and girls as young as 10 and 12 arrive already married and the marriages have been conducted as consensual contracts between parents but not recognized by the government?

What legal rights, what services are available for these girls, victims of an early and forced marriage? What happens to very young girls who become widows? Because the world is in crisis and the number of refugees is growing early childhood marriage is on the increase worldwide despite illegalities. Parents think they are protecting their girls from sexual violence by marrying them to older men. Instead, these girls are deprived of their basic human rights along with the children they give birth to, often dying or experiencing physical injuries while doing so.

Refugee children who spend their most critical development years from birth to age 5 often experience physical and emotional violence that disrupts their normal development. They suffer the consequences of health issues, PTSD, depression, and behavioral problems including severe aggression. These children will be our future generation. How will they cope? How will they be able to function in a future world and be the next set of leaders? The number of children affected is staggering. It is important therefore, that the rights of children and their SAFE access to education and basic health and psychological services be respected and implemented.

In ISIS controlled areas of the middle east, women and girls are sold openly in slave markets to men who buy them for the price of a package of cigarettes, slightly higher if they are virgins. The story was told of one young girl in Syria who was sold 22 times in 2 years. Girls are given birth control so they can be sold and reused many times. Once a week they are washed by being sprayed while they are naked by men. Sometimes they are used for organ donations, or simply for torture. On average every 10 minutes somewhere in the world, a woman gives birth to a stateless child.

In general, male refugees often give their own first accounts of experiences but little to no attention is paid to what women experience. So male experiences become the norm. Most refugee women do not seek out services out of fear, ignorance and language issues. It therefore becomes the responsibility of the destination country to make sure that women know about what services are available to them and with safe access. In addition, while education is perceived as important it is not a life-saving need and often comes after food, health, water, sanitation, agriculture, and infrastructure systems are put into place. Leaving refugee women out of education leaves them socially and economically desperate leading to various forms of violence and high-risk behavior (such as prostitution).

Refugee women coming to America are the least likely to have an education and to take advantage of offered services. They either work two jobs (when they do get a job) or are home full time with family with no time to seek further education. Single mothers have the least time and resources to pursue an education. Barriers to women refugees include: Lack of tax benefits; employer flexibility ; flexible course time and/or technology (if they can take advantage of courses offered); language issues and requirement

for fluency in English first; stereotypical attitudes, patriarchy, perpetuation of cultural norms re roles of men vs women.

Refugees are usually treated as victims rather than a resource with potential that builds on their strengths. Many are viewed with fear by their new communities.

The situation is not as bleak as it sounds for many refugees. Jordan, for example, provides security in its refugee camps and has three categories of camps designed for safety: camps for families; segregated camps for men who have been in the military; and camps that contain families that are grouped together by the region in Syria they come from in order to keep cultural communities together. UNFPA is now training women to protect themselves and they provide safe places where only women and girls live so they can participate in decision-making and feel more empowered. They are also trying to track pregnant women in migration so they can give birth in a safe place.

Unarmed civilian peacekeepers such as the NonViolent Peaceforce are using nonviolent methods to protect women and children in areas of crisis particularly noted in South Sudan. However, the world will never have peace unless women are invited to the peace table and be active and equal participants in peace negotiations.

My takeaways from the migration sessions are the following.

- No one seems to be learning about displacement and interventions by the international community is not enough. We see a repeat of interventions that are ineffective especially for women and girls with the worst indicators for global inequality.
- We are still living in a patriarchal society that makes use of conflict and the subordinate positions of women. Women's rights defenders need to defend the rights of women and children in crisis situations and we must fight patriarchy and all those institutions that reproduce patriarchy.
- After 70 of the United Nations, we still do not have a safer world. In migration, women and children bear the burden so how do we as both societies and individuals make them feel welcome? How do we open our homes and our hearts to others? In a world that calls on us to be one society, we often forget the value of holding onto and appreciating diversity.

Encouraging Women and empowering them to Vote (Canada and the USA)

A study in the USA and Canada showed that non-profit organizations such as the YWCA and other service-oriented non-profits, have access to, and the trust of, marginalized women in their communities 76% of whom are unmarried. Therefore these nonprofits are in a perfect position to engage women in the electoral process in order to encourage them to vote and also to seek office, putting them in a position to make a difference for their own communities. The women reached are more likely to be younger, more ethnically diverse and lower-income than other voters. One third of unmarried women are not registered to vote and when they are registered, are less likely to turn out to vote, but when they do, they make an impact. In the USA, voting rights for women and marginalized groups has a complex history that required

constitutional amendments. In Canada, the first women with the right to vote were those in the military in the first world war. Voter registration in Canada is much easier than it is in the USA and a voter can register at the time of the election. Voting is a powerful tool for advocacy and is a fundamental hard won right for women in the USA. Women need to be encourage to take advantage of it.

Public Access and Gender: Safe Cities for Girls – SDG Goal 11

What does urbanization mean to women and girls? Women and girls the world over need and deserve safe places to live and work, but instead experience violence and discrimination. How do we plan for safer cities? This is a dialog that requires more than physical design, it also means a change in social constructs. Women and girls often experience sexual violence and harassment, have little to no freedom to move safely in public spaces and have their movements restricted as a result. When it's not safe, they stay home or risk the threat of bodily harm... to go to school, to work, do their shopping.

A pilot project in Cairo, Hanoi, Kampala and Delhi called Safe Cities for Girls, set up a curriculum for adolescent girls on being safe in the city and to encourage them to speak out about their safety issues. The program also included adolescent boys in order to make them aware of the challenges faced by the girls. In addition to working with the girls, the program also engaged civic leaders and the public transportation sector. As a result, street lights were repaired (for example) making it safer to be out at night and bus-drivers were trained to make them more aware and to help them to identify situations where girls would be at risk while using public transit.

The 2030 Agenda and the Transformation of Society

Half the population of the world is female. In order for us to 'leave no one behind', women must engage in the political process. Equality is enshrined in the SDGs and we cannot wait for another 100 years to achieve it. Women must engage politically to achieve justice and access to equal opportunities. They must also invest in their children and their families. Women bear the burden of providing unpaid care, so when women are empowered politically, they have greater involvement in improving societal issues such as health and child care.

Women have been and can be agents of transformation and have been doing it for more than 100 years, but we must **choose** to be agents of change in order to transform our abilities and make the change in order to keep our communities together. Resistance to women's leadership is deeply ingrained worldwide. Boys must be educated to listen and we must educate both boys and girls to make the transformation we are seeking in the 2030 agenda.

What are the specific transformation issues we are working for? ending violence against women to expose the domination of one group over another; ending conflict resolution with violence – challenge militarism and structures that are unempowering (such as prisons); involving the critical mass ie more women leaders; bringing social economic human rights to all populations; economic empowerment of women; control of our bodies.

Women already understand that ALL women need to be at the table with more constituents claiming their rights. Many more women are empowered economically than ever before but the vast majority of women still are not and the inequality between men and women has widened globally in recent years.

Quotes to take away:

“Women should be agents of development.”

“Implementation, implementation, implementation”

“Women and girls represent half of the 60 million of the world’s displaced persons”

“A country that does not protect its women during peace will not protect them in conflict.”

“Conflict and war are waged using the bodies of women”

“Women in the USA do care about CEDAW”

“Change cannot be a normal change. It has to a giant leap for woman kind.” Lakshmi Puri

“Reality check! The weight loss market is a 55 billion dollar a year industry” Girls be Heard