

Report on CSW59

CSW 59 What an amazing event! About 8,600 people, including several supportive men, from 1,100 organisations registered for this event 20 years after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was agreed and it was stated that Women's Rights are Human Rights. 30,000 people attended that meeting and the earth could have been knocked off its orbit if all had jumped together!

The first event for NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) was the Consultation Day held at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem where I was lucky enough to meet the Queen Mother Dr Delois Blakely, honorary Mayor of Harlem, again – an amazing lady who works tirelessly for everyone. This meeting was chaired by Soon-Young Yoon, Chair of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women/New York.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women (former Deputy President of South Africa) gave an inspiring speech and she hoped that in the next 15 years we would break the back of gender inequality. We must link up with all those who listen and even those who don't listen and try to implement goals every year – not wait for years.

The keynote speaker was Ruchira Gupta who spoke about "The Selling of Innocents", a film that she had made with her charity Apne Aap. In 2013 the Indian Penal Code was changed to abolish sex trafficking. Today there are 27m enslaved people worldwide and most of these are women and children.

There were two very interesting panel discussions during the day. The second one was a Youth Panel "Strategic Action to Strengthen the BPfA: Young Activist Perspectives". The Moderator was a young man and the 5 panelists included one 20 year old man from Mexico who had set up an organisation called "Young Men for Gender Equality". Mary Robinson was a special guest for this panel and told us that you have to stand up for what you believe in – pay the price and do it! Work with others.

Dr Gertrude Mongela spoke about "What Beijing Plus 20 Must Accomplish". She asked if those who were in Beijing and had committed to taking home their homework had done it. Did you do it? She felt that we were now on the right track in working for equality and must not be discouraged by being told that we have not achieved anything. Dr Mongela also congratulated those men in governments and communities who have sometimes changed their minds more than women! We were told that "The revolution has begun, there is no going back". In 20 years we want to see women who were not born when the Beijing meeting was held taking care of the world. Identify the man you want to be equal to.

The International Women's Day March from The Dag Hammarskjold Plaza to Times Square had started earlier in the day and several of us went to Times Square to join the march which was a fantastic experience – so many people and so much enthusiasm.

Sally kindly gave me the ticket to the Opening Ceremony and after the election of officers we enjoyed several short speeches when we were told that a great deal of work has been done to contribute to change in the lives of women and girls but that acceleration of action is needed and

that we should work with all stakeholders to achieve this – we must all be drivers, actors and beneficiaries of progress – do not leave any one out.

Ban Ki-moon addressed the meeting and said that the world will never realise 100% of its goals if 50% of the people cannot utilise their abilities. He told us that of the member states represented at the UN there are 5 countries that have no women MPs and 8 that have no women as cabinet ministers!

The President of the Security Council addressed the CSW for the first time and said among other comments that he was concerned about the emancipation of women and freedom from trafficking. He told us we must all be aware of the millions of women and children who are excluded, forced to flee, suffer from climate change and Ebola. We were also told that only 25% of the high posts in the UN are held by women and that they must have women in high posts and serve as a model for outside organisations.

Several other speakers followed and all said that women should have their rights and they all committed to working towards this. It was felt that changing law is easier than changing attitudes and behaviour and that the spirit of Beijing must be revitalised – tenacity and steadfastness will eventually pay off.

I also attended the following events during the week.

“Present but invisible: It’s time to Hear Our Stories” was presented by Soroptimist International (SI) when 4 of their members from various parts of the world told of their personal experiences including a young member who had experienced sexual violence, forced marriage where the speaker, from India who suffered violence from her husband was told by the police that “The husband is the God, You are supposed to worship him”. She was followed by a member from Ireland where there is the 5th highest suicide rate among youngsters in Europe and SI started a successful campaign to support youngsters with mental health problems. In May they all wore green ribbons as did the Irish football team.

The Nordic Baltic Network of Policewomen held an event called Trafficking in Human Beings. We were told that the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) cooperates with the Baltic countries to promote the importance of cross-border efforts to fight human trafficking which is a horrific violation of people’s human rights and is happening all over the world. The majority of those trafficked are women and children. We were told that 55% of all victims work as forced labour while 88% of sex workers are trafficked. Insecurity in conflict and breakdown of the family leads to sexual violence and trafficking so we must be certain that people are properly vetted if they are to take care of our safety. All parties in armed conflict are required to protect girls and women from rape and violence and governments and UN agencies must do all they can to bridge gaps in legislation – don’t just talk! Empower women and girls as the real agents for change. One of the questions asked was what can ordinary citizens do to prevent this – we were told that we should report anything we see, hear or know – stake out places, take car number plates etc. There should be no tolerance of this. This group is currently focusing on the Nordic area but is hoping to expand this in the future.

Another “Nordic” event that I attended was “Cool Feminism - Exploring Ideas from the North”. This was organised by the Women’s Movement in Iceland where they have the lowest gender gap in the world. The opening remarks were by Eyglo Hroardottir, Minister of Social Affairs and Housing in Iceland and Minister of Nordic Cooperation. The aim of the event was to introduce feminist activism in Iceland and the demands of the Nordic Women’s Movement following the Nordic Forum in 2014,

which was based on the Beijing Platform for Action. The Nordic Group includes Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Greenland, Finland and the Faroe Islands.

We were told that although there is a strong women's movement in the Nordic countries there is still a lot to be achieved. Women are in the minority in most legislators and also in the media and academia among others. We were encouraged to support equal rights through the HeforShe Campaign.

"19th Century Slavery, 20th Century Totalitarianism, 21st Century Gender Equality" – we are still working hard to achieve the latter. The rights of women are still being questioned by organisations and we must not just sit and do nothing when the world challenges the rights of women. "Nothing happens just because you wish for it, you will have to make it happen. If we don't include the men we will not move forward".

Gertrud Astrom, President of the Swedish Women's Lobby spoke about New Grassroot Actions on Women's Rights following the Nordic Forum 2014 which produced an outcome document that included 12 articles relating to women's empowerment and the City of Malmo has adopted all of these for their municipality.

Gudrun Jonsdottir, Spokesperson for Stigamot, Counselling and Information Centre on Sexual Violence, talked about Stretching the Limits. She told us that women only earn 2/3 of men's total salary. She also said that their justice system is paralysed and that only about 5 rape cases a year are successful. She felt that male violence was their biggest shame and stated that the choice was between empowerment or victimisation. In 2009 buying of women was criminalised and in 2010 strip clubs were closed down (mainly employing trafficked women). However, there is still a flourishing porn industry and sex advertisements in the papers. There also appears to be resistance from the police to deal with this and a lack of political will. Champagne Clubs were then introduced where KR20,000 paid for a bottle of champagne and a girl to talk to for 10 minutes, KR60,000 gave you the girl and 1 hour! These were in the same place as the old strip clubs and encouraged prostitution and trafficking. Stigamot opened its own Champagne Club. The result of this was that two of the other Champagne Clubs closed and five people were prosecuted.

There were two other interesting speakers, one was a mother, teacher and feminist who told us that gender should be taught in a different way, be honest and do things properly, be bold and talk about challenging things. Everyone takes part in the course and it is taught in 17 out of 33 schools in Iceland. She finished by quoting Edmund Burke – "Bad things happen when good people do nothing". The final speaker, Irma Erlingsdóttir, Director of UNU-GEST and Associate Professor, emphasised that we should all work together across borders. There is no blueprint to follow on the "different cultures call for different approaches."

On 25 October 2010 25% of women went on strike as they worked from 0900-1700 but were only paid from 0900-1425!

The final "Nordic" event that I attended at CSW59 was "The 10th International Helvi Sipilä Seminar entitled Gender, Power and Economy". Helvi Sipilä was a Finnish lawyer, diplomat and the first female Assistant Secretary-General of the UN. This event was organised by the Permanent Mission of Finland to the UN and the Finnish Federation of University Women among others.

We heard that gender equality is a human right and benefits everyone, including men and that the role of men and boys in gender equality should not be underestimated and that the Finnish Prime Minister has recently joined the UN's HeforShe Campaign.

Dr Paivi Mattila, Secretary General of the Finnish League for Human Rights who had participated in the Beijing meeting felt that most of the decisions taken in Beijing are still missing and that few countries mention or commit to women's economic rights. She spoke on Budget Cuts in Europe – Do Women Pay the Price Again? In Europe there have been strict austerity measures and cuts in government spending but no assessment has been made of the effects of these on the people. The crisis has had significant gender consequences with an increase in homelessness and an increased need for healthcare. She asked how could bankrupt men decide what should be done – the health cuts have been detrimental to women and children. She felt that power was escaping from elected institutions to corporations. However, she also felt that not all women were losing out as some have well-established economic and social rights while men do not – we must let go to “Third World Women”. She stated that men and women who are wealthy often appear to be blind to the plight of the poor. She finished by telling us that governments must provide basic services to all and be held accountable if they do not and referring to three important documents – The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, CEDAW, Convention on the Rights of the Child – and that women in Greece and Spain are marching against poverty.

The second speaker was from Belize, Tricia Gideon, Vice President to World YWCA Board who spoke on Caribbean Women, Microfinance and Empowerment. She opened her remarks by quoting from Martin Luther King saying “A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. ... A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.”

She told us that microfinancing provides credit, savings and social services and mentioned Pro Mujer which is a leading women's development organization founded in Bolivia that provides women in Latin America with the vital services necessary to become financially independent, healthy and leaders in their communities as they hold the key to raising themselves and their children out of poverty. 43% of women in Belize work in the new, unregistered sector with no sustainable livelihood, however they are not connected to the social system so if they are sick they have no income and expensive care. The speaker felt that governments loved NGOs as they help to reduce governments' social responsibilities. She asked if women can challenge the economy and re-distribute power and can they have access to the same resources as men? She told us that we need a humane society regardless of gender. Should microfinance be treated as a right? How can it move from empowering debt to empowering money? Microfinance is the idea of capitalism that is driven by social awareness – do you agree or disagree?

The Finnish Ambassador, who was attending the meeting but had to leave for his next meeting which was the revitalisation of the General Assembly, asked if there was any chance of having a female in charge! However, he stated that having listened to the speakers he was more aware of the lack of attention given to women's economic empowerment and said that Finland will adjust its statement to the CSW.

The final speaker for this event was Dr Gloria Ramirez from Mexico who is UNESCO Chair in Human Rights, the National Autonomous University of Mexico and a Member of the CSW Delegation of the International Federation of University Women. In her presentation Gender, Care and Sustainable Economy she spoke about women's economic autonomy and access to fundamental rights. The majority of women perform domestic work whether or not they have a paid job. Hidden poverty is not lack of money but excessive work in the house.

I also attended two events on Islam and Women – “Imans for She: Sharia as a Source of Women's Rights” organised by Muslims for Progressive Values and “Recognising Common Ground: Islam and Women's Human Rights” was organised by the Indonesian Mission and Musawah, a Global

Movement for Equality & Justice in the Muslim Family. Both of these events were very informative and we learned a great deal about the problems of women in Islam and were surprised at some of their rights. We were told that it is a legal fiction if you say that men are the protectors of the rights of women. They encounter the problem of law as written and law as practiced and are tired of negativity in the media. It was felt that we should be able to talk about women's rights and human rights without religious discourse as human rights and Islam are compatible

I also attended some of the UK Briefings and the NGO Briefing as well as the following events:

"A Toolkit to Advance Women in the Workplace: New Research, Online Tools and Innovative Policies from San Francisco – Armenian Centre" – this was held in the Ballroom which had been separated into two rooms by a curtain which made it difficult to hear the speakers so I did not stay there.

"Ensuring Education for Girls and Women and the Post-2015 Agenda" –Business and Professional Women International, Zonta International, International Federation of University Women, International Council of Women, Soroptimist International started "Project 5-0" 28 years ago. This was an update on the work that has been done to date in using the skills and expertise of members to support training courses in income generating skills and a commitment to continue working together to encourage people to work for equality – never judge a woman by her age! The representative for Soroptimist International said that we need a conference for men and women to work together and pointed out that they had been the first organisation to bring a side vent to the CSW where every speaker was a man.

"Economic Empowerment of Women and Women in Decision Making – Egyptian Mission". Only 2% of the women in the world are millionaires so we must address the problem of women not having as much money as men. However there were several positive comments – Saudi Arabia has a bank for women and has 30 women in parliament, Egypt managed to get women's rights into their constitution in spite of political unrest, in Kenya 30% of government procurement goes to Women's SMEs. It was strongly felt that peace and security are important as there are new forms of violence against women and women are still being sold. We must all work together against gender based violence if we are to achieve equality and equal pay. Women have to fight again and again for the same issues. On a positive note Business and Professional Women Germany have been pushing for a quota of women in their parliament and this was recently passed with a quote of 30%.

"Bringing Down the Barriers: Women, Business and the Rule of Law – Uganda House". We were told that women don't just have to break the glass ceiling but contend with sticky floors and leaking pipelines! Women are the most underused utility yet they can operate in the same environment as men but restrictions come from labour laws and family laws. Research on the business environment has helped us to gain a better understanding of the obstacles that entrepreneurs and employees face in general when it comes to starting a business but what about the obstacles that are specific to women. If all women were excluded from the labour force per capita income would fall by approximately 40%.

On the Friday evening I attended an event organised by the World Bank Group and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) among others. This was a play written and performed by World Bank Group staff and addressed gender based violence – "Neda Wants to Die". It was a very disturbing play but I am glad that I saw it. At the Consultation Day we were told that the Security Council takes the problem of women in armed conflict very seriously and although laws have been passed they have often not been implemented.

This last comment was repeated often at most events – decisions have been taken but not implemented and this is something that must change. It was often said that while we are working for women and girls we must include young boys as well.

Jane Tatchell writes in a personal capacity.