

Commission on the Status of Women – progress on achieving gender equality, the empowerment of women and their human rights

March 9th-20th 2015, Jane Tatchell and Sally Spear, representing UNA-UK's WAC-UNA and BPW, attended the first week of CSW 59 and followed its progress in the second week. This Commission on the Status of Women is the opportunity for the UN member governments to discuss their progress in enabling the gender equality and encouragement of women, that was prescribed at the 4th World Conference for Women in 1995 in Beijing and its Platform for Action, subsequently leading to Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Security Council resolution 1325 and other tools for removing discrimination against women and upholding their human rights.

Each year CSW meets for two weeks, concentrating on certain themes. This year is remarkable because we celebrate Beijing+20, also the Millennium Goals (MDGs), having achieved some successes, are being replaced by the post-2015 SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals).ⁱ The SDGs will be expanded to include more on the environment and hopefully some matters of great concern to women which were omitted from the MDGs (17 goals, 169 targets probably, gender mainstreaming with a standalone goal on women). The work of CSW this year focussed on two papers, in the first of the two weeks they signed the short "Political Declaration on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women", renewing the governments' pledges to implement the Beijing agenda. In the second week they agreed the Working Methods Resolution ("Future organisation and methods of work of the CSW") – to improve how CSW is run. Women want to ensure the annual CSW meeting does last the full 2 weeks, and that civil society and NGOs with expertise are involved in preparing outcome documents.

Discrimination against women remains the most widespread injustice in the world today. Not one country has achieved gender equality. At least 8500 women and some men, from 1100 NGOs around the world, therefore attended the CSW 59 to get their voices and points of view across to the government representatives and into the documents. The UK government's representatives are very supportive and met the UK NGO women most days to exchange news of the negotiations. Women from other countries might not have been able or allowed to attend, but those who could, spoke up about many issues. Few NGOs are able to observe the main meetings for government representatives, and if they do seldom can they join the discussion. A limited number of NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC can make written or oral statements. This time UN Women allowed 26 oral NGO statements, each lasting no more than 3 minutes, and we were pleased that 6 of those NGOs came from the UK.

The NGOs were upset that they were not consulted over the drafts of the documents, and that important points were omitted or watered down to avoid contention with those countries opposing gender equality. The wording in the two documents and the SDGs really matters, and has enormous repercussions for women. For example, at Beijing "children" needed to be clarified to include the girl child. Now "women" needs to be women of all ages to include young and old. Widows are thought to be old, but with child marriage early or forced, loss of husbands may mean a child is a widow, suffering abuse. "Health" needs to include sexual and reproductive health and rights. Many abuses and injustices, bad traditional or cultural practices which are harmful to women (like Forced Genital Mutilation or murder of wives) need to be explicitly condemned. Goals and targets for SDGs

need to be monitored and resourced, and the statistics need to be disaggregated, to highlight the disproportionate effect of poverty on women for example. The two CSW documents were anodyne and many women were infuriated by the processes. Civil society and the expertise of NGOs must be closely involved in these processes.

Besides the main UN meetings, NGOs have a parallel programme covering many topics. The space allocated for these meetings is limited and in some cases at remote sites with noisy halls. Surely in New York and at the UN, better places can be found!

Some of the key points of interest to Sally at the parallel meetings were:-

- abuses - BASIRA (British Arabs Supporting Universal Women's Rights) for example makes films to build better more peaceful community cohesion between Arabs and the host culture, between East and West, ending horrific honour-based violence etc.
- mental health (most illness is due to depression)
- research into media (women are given less radio and TV time than men and are also not taken so seriously)
- oppressed workers in dangerous conditions - a girl spoke, who, aged 13, was injured when the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh collapsed, has flash backs so can no longer be the family's worker
- Excellent American students did local research projects to improve their communities – on suicide rates, health, pay. Their example could be used in the UK

Now that CSW 59 is over, work continues to hold the governments to their words and agreements, to implement their intentions, words into action, assign resources and political will to achieving gender equality NOW! Gender equality is not an optional extra, it is a necessity.

Sally Spear, Vice-Chair of the UNA Women's Advisory Council (WACUNA) writes in a personal capacity.

ⁱ In a letter to the Economist, Marianne Haslegrave said:

The earlier Millennium Development Goal 3: 'Promote gender equality and empower women' merely pointed to gender disparity in primary and secondary education; the situation of women in waged employment in the non-agriculture sector; and the representation of women in parliament. This was based on data then easily available, but fell far short of addressing gender inequities.

The six targets of the proposed SDG5, however, although not perfect, are much broader. They will cover discrimination against women everywhere; violence against women and girls; child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation; unpaid care and domestic work; women's participation in decision-making; and their sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, including HIV vulnerability.

..... Women and girls make up more than half the world's population and have a right to this agenda for the achievement of gender equality in the next 15 years. These targets are for all women and girls in every country, developed and developing and truly aim to "leave no one behind."