

Reflecting on Our Spaces at the CSW

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As young women working in a feminist and women's human rights organization based in the global North, we attended the 54th session on the UN Commission of the Status of Women and have the following thoughts about our experiences.

In 2010, women's human rights activists around the world mark the 15th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), a landmark document which has impacted the ways governments set policies and laws to support women's rights worldwide. The BPfA identifies twelve critical areas of concern for women's rights and is one of the most comprehensive and progressive UN documents to address the realities of women's lives. The thousands of women's rights advocates that attended the parallel NGO forum in Beijing in 1995 played a significant role in shaping the Beijing Platform for Action. While we did not attend the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, as we were just children in elementary school at the time, we have benefited from the long-lasting impact that the BPfA has had on civil society and governments. The 2010 CSW undertook a fifteen-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which provided us an opportunity to better understand how women's human rights advocacy has progressed in the last two decades.

Throughout the two week meeting, we fought through exhaustion and crowded halls to attend as many official and NGO-sponsored sessions as possible. The topics of these sessions ranged from sexual and reproductive rights to the economic crisis to the creation of the new gender equality entity and more. Official agreed resolutions centered on the following topics: women, the girl child and HIV/AIDS; release of women and children taken hostage, including those subsequently imprisoned, in armed conflicts; eliminating maternal mortality and morbidity through the empowerment of women; the situation of and assistance to Palestinian women; support for the new UN gender entity; women's economic empowerment; and ending female genital mutilation.

In our opinion, the most useful aspect of the CSW was that women's rights activists were able to network and strategize about their experiences and the situation of women worldwide, regionally and locally. However, one of the primary frustrations at this year's CSW was the lack of physical space to allow for these interactions. At almost every session, delegates that arrived on time were too late to find seats, and so many times we heard frustrated colleagues say, "This is ridiculous! I can't hear anything. I give up!" Leading up to the 54th CSW, UN officials and governments were

The Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) develops and facilitates women's leadership for women's human rights and social justice worldwide. CWGL was founded as a project of Douglass College in 1989 and is based at Rutgers University. CWGL's programs promote the leadership of women and advance feminist perspectives in policy-making processes in local, national and international arenas. CWGL works from a human rights perspective with an emphasis on violence against women, sexual and reproductive health and socio-economic well-being. Since 1993, CWGL has been monitoring the Commission on the Status of Women and various other official UN proceedings.

well aware of the impending space restrictions due to the renovations at the United Nations. While we welcome the much needed update, it could not have taken place at a more inopportune time. On special anniversaries, the UN is aware of a spike in attendance, and the 15th anniversary of the BPfA was no exception. Approximately 8,000 people registered for the 2010 CSW (an unusually high number), which illustrates women's desire for an international space for strategizing about women's rights and meeting with government representatives. Unfortunately, the women of the world came to the United Nations Headquarters in New York only to be met with rooms exceeding capacity, little public space for gatherings and a disappointing level of engagement with member states about the Beijing Platform for Action.

Another issue we reflected on was who was occupying the spaces at the UN. First of all, we recognize the UN as a privileged institution; often interactions there are between governments and civil society elite, which tends to exclude the voices of those living the realities of unjust policies. We noticed the absence of a strong grassroots presence on most panels at the CSW. These voices are critical to understanding shared experiences and discussing strategies that are applied locally in efforts to address women's rights and to mitigate the effects of human rights and development crises – particularly the recent financial crisis. Women of all ages were engaged at the CSW, but overall feminists must develop more systematic youth leadership rather than just multigenerational symbolic efforts. We recommend that women's human rights organizations bring in new voices and reconfigure their current models of leadership to include more youth from diverse backgrounds such as LGBT youth and young women of color to enable the women's movement to grow stronger and become more dynamic.

Perhaps the most exasperating encounter we faced was the conservative organizations' co-opting of "motherhood" in support of a homophobic, anti-reproductive rights agenda. As younger women from a progressive women's rights organization, we cherish and look up to our mothers, grandmothers, and the women that have shared a role in shaping our lives. By distributing bright yellow bags and pins with the phrase "support motherhood," these groups misled delegates to accept right wing propaganda under the guise of being pro-mother. At a time when women's rights advocates have been facing a pervasive backlash in their own countries, the CSW is yet another location where activists must be aware of the presence of right wing, ultra-conservative, and fundamentalist groups. During the 2010 CSW, women who upheld the sexual and reproductive right framework were powerful in numbers and strategic about where safe spaces existed, thus strengthening civil society support for sexual and reproductive health and rights. Nonetheless, the right wing's visible presence and their ability to influence several member states on language limiting women's rights to safe abortion and sexual rights was frustrating.

Feminist activists must be vigilant in our work to ensure that these groups do not scale back the gains we have made in women's rights.

On a positive note, we were very pleased about the progress towards the creation of new spaces and resources for work on women's rights at the UN. Throughout the CSW, the establishment of the new gender equality and women's empowerment entity was on everyone's minds. In almost all the panels we attended, women were discussing the new gender entity. On the UN official observance of International Women's Day, March 3rd, [GEAR advocates raised signs in the balcony with the message "GEAR UP NOW"](#) and were greeted with enthusiastic applause. As the UN Secretary General smiled and waved at those of us holding the message, it was surprising to see how such a relatively simple act can carry so much significance. We were excited and energized by all the attention paid to this subject, but concerned with the details of this new entity and how the women's movement will play a long-lasting role in its development. Civil society representatives were supportive yet skeptical of the process for the creation of the new gender entity. There are still many critical aspects to be resolved and the GEAR Campaign will continue to monitor this process through September.

Regarding key issues that we felt were important to explore, the economic crisis and alternative approaches for economic recovery featured prominently in this year's CSW. We found that speakers were critical of the ways governments are limiting social programming and social spending, because this approach to dealing with the crisis will only reinforce the growing inequalities in many societies. Governments have a responsibility to respect, protect, and fulfill [human rights obligations](#) to all of their citizens, and the crisis is an example of how they, along with international monetary and development organizations, are not doing enough to provide higher standards of living, especially to those citizens whose economic situation was already weak prior to the crisis.

Furthermore, while speaking with colleagues during the CSW, we realized that many of us lack a real understanding of the global political economy and the specific policies that influence our work around women's rights. We heard numerous times that economics is "too confusing" or "too technical," but it is we feminists and women's rights organizations who have a responsibility to better educate ourselves in the field of economic rights and incorporate this perspective into our work.

Addressing violence against women was another major theme in many parallel events and numerous UN-sponsored programs. In fact, there were so many sessions related to violence against women that one could have filled her entire week with those programs alone! CWGL

organized a Round-Table Discussion on the 16 Days Campaign, which was attended by about 120 activists from around the world. This session and others provided excellent opportunities to link up in person with some of the groups we have been working with on the campaign to discuss new strategies for moving our advocacy forward. Aside from the NGO-run programs during CSW, the United Nations also made another tangible step in improving documentation and knowledge-sharing among countries with its launch of the [Global Virtual Knowledge Center to End Violence Against Women and Girls](#).

The issue of gender-based violence has been on the agenda of women's rights activists for decades now, and at times it was fatiguing and frustrating to attend so many sessions related to violence. While many of the sessions went deeper in their analysis of violence against women, women's human rights activists must ensure that our efforts move us beyond the "awareness-raising" process and also push the agenda towards addressing the structures that allow violence against women to persist. For example, a number of organizations are explicitly addressing militarism, fundamentalisms, and culture in terms of their intersections with gender-based violence, which are not new to feminists, but deserve more practical consideration in our work. There is also need to create greater space for dialogues about the increasing backlash against women who challenge the sexual and gender norms of their community, women with HIV/AIDS, women who advocate for reproductive rights, and women human rights defenders who face challenges from their families and communities.

At the 54th UN Commission on the Status of Women, governments, UN entities, civil society, and women's rights groups from around the world congregated to undertake the review of the BPfA and judge the progress that countries have made since Beijing. Sharing best practices, analyzing challenges and, most importantly, strategizing a path forward beyond the status-quo were the ways in which this session of the CSW was successful. In the future, NGOs organizing activities should consider hosting more trainings and workshops rather than panels that often do not allow for enough cross conversations. Nonetheless, despite constraints on the spaces available to us this year, we maximized every moment and were re-energized by spending time with our sisters. Fifteen years after Beijing, we know that change is a slow process that requires patience and constant vigilance to ensure the movement does not cede any ground. Our differences are real, and a 'global sisterhood' as envisioned by the women who attended the Fourth World Conference on Women remains a challenge. However, the CSW affords us an important space to think critically about the trajectory of our advocacy. Having an opportunity to physically come together each year to learn from one another reinforces and renews our energy and commitment to the global women's rights movement.