

Reflections on CSW55, New York, 2011 - a remarkable and memorable fortnight

The Commission on Status of Women, CSW, and its accompanying NGO meetings held in New York late winter are addictive – and in spite of extreme cold and the huge crowds I was ‘hooked’ after my first experience - CSW 54 in 2010. This is hardly surprising as it was the ‘Beijing + 15’ Review meeting. Being Stephanie Hutchinson’s Alternate NZFUW observer to Beijing Women’s Conference 1995 and attending the NGO Forum had widened my horizons immensely, opening my eyes to the diverse lives led by so many women in Asia Pacific region in particular and triggering a deep interest in the multiple issues explored in the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA).

CSW 55 / 2011 was different as both the NGO pre-CSW meeting and CSW itself were a day shorter - a UN holiday fell on the first Monday of the allotted fortnight viz. last week of February and first week of March. There were also fewer participants in 2011 hence shorter queues for registration and easier access to the amazing variety of NGO ‘parallel’ events in 2-hour time slots from 8am to 6pm. However, access to ‘side’ events in UN space – panels and forums presented by UN agencies or Governments and sometimes in coalition with international NGOs - was much harder as everyone needed a pass and there was huge competition for these, especially in the first week.

On the Sunday afternoon before the NGO CSW Consultation Day I was welcomed warmly to the Consultation of Commonwealth National Women’s Machineries (NWM) and also quizzed as to why more observers did not attend. It was a vigorous meeting and fascinating too as a wide age range of African and Caribbean women shared their challenges and successes and compared strategies eg gender disaggregated stats; gender responsive budgeting; “Gender auditors... The Centre for Global Women’s Leadership (CGWL) at Rutgers University is one of the Commonwealth Secretariat’s three partners in organising a Leadership Training Certificate Programme for Women MPs, NWM and Ministers too this pilot was to be pre-tested the next day. This initiative matches well the 2011 theme for Commonwealth Women: **“Women as Agents of Change”** Earlier in the day, eminent Professor Barbara Bailey, Gender and Development Studies, University of West Indies, had outlined the need to work in eight priority areas. [Ref 1] and these were explored.

IFUW had a strong contingent at CSW55 whose theme: "Access and participation of women and girls in education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work" - “could not be more timely” according to Ms Michelle Bachelet in her opening plenary statement as Exec Director of UN Women and this theme was certainly ‘spot on’ for IFUW [Ref 2] It was also feasible to follow one’s own strands of interest as well.

Monday 21 Feb was an engrossing NGO/CSO Consultation Day in the huge, hospitable Salvation Army Headquarters. Keynote speaker, Ms Michelle Bachelet, first Under S-G and Exec Director of UN Women, had our rapt attention as she outlined UN Women’s priorities and discussed CSW55’s priority theme. CSW’s review theme of “The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child” was also high-lighted – it has been high in IFUW priorities ever since they worked so hard to get “The girl-child” included as a Critical Area of Concern’ in BPfA, 1995. There is also an ‘emerging issue’ for 2011 – “Gender equality and sustainable development” with special mention of ‘Eliminating preventable mortality and morbidity and the empowerment of women’. A panel featuring outstanding women from Nigeria, US, Israel and Fiji spoke on “Education, Science and Technology”. Dr Akanisi Kedrayate, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Law at the University of the South Pacific and President of Fiji Assn of Women Graduates was very well received. During CSW55 Akanisi was approached often for more details about FAWG’s most successful initiative of ‘Science camps’ for girls from remote areas of Fiji Islands, supported by Virginia Gildersleeve Fund who sponsored Akanisi to New York. Akanisi also spoke enthusiastically at a special VGIF event later, [Ref 3] which also provided welcome space for IFUW members to catch up with one another.

After a casual networking lunch-break, themed breakout sessions contributed further to many delighted reunions and new friendships. Animated workshops tackled four separate aspects of the CSW themes, providing long lists of initiatives from all continents as well as more ‘connections’, then succinct plenary reports and interventions and finally an uplifting contribution by Project Girl Performance Collective with *“Girl Power; Voices without borders”*. Powerful stuff! And a taste of the full and exciting days ahead with such a multi-ethnic gathering ranging from teens to seniors.

The next nine days, apart from Sunday spent 'museuming', required careful planning to get the most from CSW and all its auxiliary events. The IFUW Briefing early on Wednesday 23rd was an excellent opportunity to hear from members involved in a special High-level UN panel and in co-organising with UNESCO a very successful side event [Ref 4]; ensure that all key issues/events of special relevance to IFUW would be covered and to meet old friends and engage with new ones.

Immediately after Marianne Haslegrave's comprehensive briefing and in the same Church Centre conference room / in sight of the UN, Pacific Women's Watch (NZ) presented its first parallel event - having been granted special consultative status at UN ECOSOC mid 2010. It was a 'full-house' and a most successful interactive session. Entitled '*Claiming Space for Pacific Women in the International Arena*' it highlighted that currently there is **no** Pacific representation among the ten places designated for the Asia-(Pacific) region on the Executive Board of UN Women.

While Charlotte Bunch, Founding Director of CWGL, Rutgers University who had led the GEAR campaign so strategically and successfully was a real draw card, Rosslyn Noonan, NZ's Human Rights Commissioner, Chair of the International Co-ordinating Committee of National Human Rights Institutions gave us 'mana' and Tara Chetty, formerly of Fiji Women's Rights Movement, a Masters student at Rutgers University spoke from the heart as a young Pacific woman committed to gender justice and the human rights of Pacific women and girls. Tara was standing in for Lisa Lahari Williams (Pacific WAVE), a Dunedin resident until recently and who, due to late receipt of funding was still en route to New York. [Ref 5]. Jane Prichard, PWW(NZ) Convenor chaired a packed-out meeting with lively, pro-active, positive discussion ensuing.

Although Jane and I had registered for CSW as members of Pacific Women's Watch (NZ), we are also long-time members of NZFGW and were its only members in New York this year. Other New Zealanders at CSW were representing the Government (four), HRC (one) and six NGOs (six) - a total of thirteen. We tried to meet most evenings to share the day's events, news, issues...

Fitted around several stunning half-day, whole day and evening highlights related to the launch of UN Women and Education for All with 'the top women' sharing their passion and plans, was a multitude of parallel events focussing on enduring problems for women and girls. Among those I attended I can particularly recall women who presented: Trafficking & violence against girls - SF responses; Campaigning by tertiary students to persuade US to ratify CEDAW (its non ratification was a huge shock to some US women there !); Girls' invisibility: Why so few? [Women in STEM /AAUW]; Non-state actor violence [CFUW]; Systematic persecution of Iranian human rights defenders; Women-friendly cities; Media's sexual objectification of women and lots more global issues

There were also opportunities to hear from our fellow Asia Pacific Women's Watch members in their feisty presentations eg Conflict resolution initiatives linked with SCR 1325; End war crimes in Burma; Small arms/IANSA Action; ISIS' media training... and many others as well as a general business meeting of all APWW members and various caucuses too.

Fortunately when flying to US from New Zealand one is allowed two pieces of luggage so going to New York I was able to carry publicity material for PWW(NZ)'s panel event and their most recent publications as well as the very popular HRC posters for NZ's Race Relations Days, 2010 and 2011. Back home I have enjoyed working my way through, and sharing, the considerable weight of printed material available 'for the taking' at CSW.

While a particular year may not have a CSW theme that especially appeals to you, I can guarantee that all the speakers you hear and the women you meet will bring it vividly alive and relevant. [Ref 6]

References:

Ref 1: <http://www.thecommonwealth.org/files/225612/FileName/WAMM1010a.pdf>

or google: Professor Barbara Bailey Commonwealth Plan of Action, then open:

[PPT] [REVISED MTR REPORT of the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender ...](#) www.thecommonwealth.org

Ref 2: The two reports of the Secretary-General on this theme [

<http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.6/2011/3> E/CN.6/2011/3 and

<http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.6/2011/5>E/CN.6/2011/5 illustrate how gender stereotypes

permeate society, and lead to segregation in the labour market. They also provide examples of measures taken by Governments, civil society and the private sector, in various parts of the world, to ensure that women and girls can exercise their right to education, that they gain greater access to decent jobs, and that they contribute equally to developing and applying the principles and tools of science and technology.

<http://lists.pacificdisability.org/pipermail/pdf-women/2011-February/000049.html> gives fuller analysis/info...

Ref 3: vgif.org/Documents/csw-2011/FAWG_USP%20CWS%20Presentation.ppt

Ref 4: New Zealander Gill Greer, Director Gen of International Planned Parenthood Federation visited briefly from London to be one of four panellists in the UNESCO –IFUW Discussion: Advancing Girls' Secondary Education: Obstacles and Opportunities.

Ref 5. Funding to attend CSW for many NGO women from the Pacific region provides a unique opportunity to speak out about the situation in their own countries. Timely funding and planning is key to effective attendance at CSW in New York BUT for many women around the Pacific region, attending CSW 55th session, their funding was not agreed until the week before travel. Not only did this rule out access to early cheaper fares but also meant late arrival or the difference between travelling and not travelling for those who could not meet the extra challenges of the time and money needed to get visas to the USA with so little notice.

Ref 6: The fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women will take place at United Nations Headquarters in New York from Monday, 27 February to Friday, 9 March 2012.

CSW 56's Priority theme is

'The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges'

The Review theme is

'Financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women '(agreed conclusions from the fifty-second session in 2007)

CSW 56 theme:

According to the Women's World Summit Foundation (www.woman.ch):

- Rural women comprise more than one quarter of the total world population.
- Five hundred million women live below the poverty line in rural areas.
- Women produce 60–80 percent of basic foodstuffs in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean. Women perform more than 50 percent of the labor involved in intensive rice cultivation in Asia. Women perform 30 percent of the agricultural work in industrialized countries.
- Women head 60 percent of households in some regions of Africa, and
- Women meet 90 percent of household water and fuel needs in Africa.
- Women process 100 percent of basic household foodstuffs in Africa.
- Rural communities have unique needs and vulnerabilities because of a lack of infrastructure, limited access to markets, and the stresses of industrialization and urbanization on rural environments.
- The United Nations (U.N.) estimates that "70 percent of the developing world's 1.4 billion people in extreme poverty live in rural areas".
- Due to societal roles, climate change and limited access to resources, rural women are often left more vulnerable than their urban counterparts.
- According to the U.N. Population Fund, as the world becomes more urbanized, the world's rural population often becomes more vulnerable because it must bear much of the weight of urban consumption.

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw55/panels/IssuesPaper-Rural-Women.pdf> provides background...

eg To provide guidance in preparing for the fifty-sixth session, the following issues could be considered:

What are the key areas where new and concerted policy measures and interventions are necessary to make measurable and accelerated progress in rural women's empowerment? What gaps need to be addressed? What is the role of different stakeholders?

What current challenges and emerging trends have an adverse impact on the situation of rural women? How can those be addressed by different stakeholders?

How can existing policy commitments to rural women's economic, legal and political empowerment be more effectively translated into concrete actions on the ground? What measures and strategies have been successful and how can those be scaled up?

What are good practice strategies for gender-responsive rural development, poverty and hunger eradication and food and nutrition security?