

THE CSW62 MEETINGS (2018)

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by

Suzanne Hanchett

Partner, Planning Alternatives for Change, LLC

Vice President, International Women's Anthropology Conference

This past March I spent two weeks at the United Nations with about 4000 other people (mostly women) at the 62nd annual meeting of the UN's Commission on the Status of Women. It wasn't just one meeting. There were around 400 events – panel discussions and performances. This year's theme was “Rural Women,” their challenges, their achievements, and their rights.

Before I talk about this experience, I want to review some background. As you know, the United Nations was founded just after World War II. [SLIDE-2] The general purpose was to prevent further wars of this scale. All existing countries participate in this organization. There are 193 state members of the U.N. and two observers (Holy See and Palestine). In addition to negotiations about war and peace, the U.N. runs social development and emergency relief programs. [SLIDE-3] Certain foundational documents frame all U.N. development programs. These are some of the principal ones – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights being the first and most basic. Almost all member states have ratified these declarations and conventions, in recognition of the special concerns of women, children, and indigenous people, and other vulnerable groups.

[SLIDE #4] A big change occurred in September 2015, when the U.N. General Assembly agreed on a framework of 17 “Sustainable Development Goals” to guide social development planning up to 2030. These “SDG's,” as we call them, are quite specific. Each one has an action

plan spelled out in specific “targets.” For example, SDG #4, to “Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning,” has ten specific targets. One is to “eliminate gender disparities in education.” Others are: to ensure equal access to education and vocational training for the vulnerable...” and to “substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers.”

Creating these 17 goals and the 169 associated targets was a broadly inclusive process that went on for five years or more. By the time the SDG’s were finalized, many thousands of people working in development world-wide had debated, discussed, and added to many drafts circulating widely among governmental and non-governmental agencies. They provide a framework to guide almost all international social development projects.

There is now a Division for Sustainable Development Goals within the U.N. Secretariat’s Department of Economic and Social Affairs. This administrative unit reviews progress reports and organizes regular meetings. A High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development in the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council also monitors actions related to achievement of the SDG’s.

[SLIDE #5] A unit now called “U.N. Women” now does planning, research, and monitoring on issues of specific concern to women. Including women themselves and women’s specific concerns in all aspects of social development is the goal of this agency. The U.N. Commission on the Status of Women, first formed in 1947, is a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council, one of the principal organs of the U.N. It consists of governmental delegates from 45 states at a time, serving four-year terms. There are five officers (Bureau Members). The 45 states members are elected by ECOSOC on the basis of equitable geographic distribution¹.

The U.N. declared 1975 as “the year of the woman,” and the decade following saw much activity on behalf of promoting women’s human rights. Between 1975 and 1995 there were four world conferences of and for women. In 1979 the U.N. General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (we call it CEDAW), and issued it for ratification in 1981. CEDAW now has been ratified by all member states except Iran, Palau, Somalia, Sudan, Tonga, and the United States. At the last world conference on women (in Beijing in 1995) the U.N. issued the “Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.”

[SLIDE #6] That is probably enough background for now. Many conventions, declarations, and promises have come out of this organization. Reality cannot match up to such high aspirations, of course, but they do serve as a beacon of hope to many, including me.

Since the early 1990s I have been following the U.N.’s work on behalf of the world’s women. I went to the 1995 world conference in China with my daughter. And for the last ten years or so, I have participated in these meetings in New York. I’m not a key player in any sense, but I am a very enthusiastic observer.

Since the 1980s I have worked in social development and community development. During the 1980s in New York City, and from 1991 internationally. Internationally I have focused on equity for women in development projects, safe water and sanitation, and supporting women’s role in water management.

Most of my international work has been in program auditing or “evaluation,” visiting many areas to check on the progress, success, or problems of development programs. I am a South Asia specialist (Bangladesh and India), but I also have had assignments in Sudan and in

the Palestinian territories. In 2011 I worked at UNICEF, helping to make some adjustments to their monitoring system. I participated in some of the extensive discussions leading up to the 2015 “Sustainable Development Goals” agreement, especially on Goal No. 6, “Clean water and sanitation.”

[SLIDE #7] My interest in the CSW meetings is not just professional. I love seeing the people who come to New York for these meetings: their clothes, their jewelry, their style. I love listening to them talk about what matters to them most. I am grateful for the opportunity to enter this space and connect with people I would otherwise never meet. I see this as a space where humanity is at least *trying* to solve problems, however frustrating or impossible the task may be. Personal stories are an important (and persuasive) part of the experience.

[SLIDE #8] Some participants, like this Egyptian woman (Hania Moheeb), need a lot of courage to speak up. She is a journalist who was sexually assaulted in a crowd during the famous “Arab Spring.” As a married woman, she risked great shame to herself and her family by discussing her experience publicly. Fortunately, her husband support her talking about it. She also took courage from the U.S. journalist, Lara Logan, who had a similar experience.

[SLIDE #9] UN Women and the Commission on the Status of Women have a definite agenda. They pick their priorities. One is girls’ education. A touching video at the 2018 inaugural session featured a young girl in India dancing home from school as she proudly announced to others that she would pass her exams, get promoted, and have a career of her own someday. The adults she encountered discouraged her. They told her that she was destined to marry at a young age, that education was not for girls, and so on. By the time she got home, she was miserable and dejected. When she sees her father, she accuses him of lying to her. Her father

reassures her that she will reach her goals. The closing message is: wait until girls are past 18 before getting them married.

A subliminal message was: men are an important part of the change that girls need. Another film I saw (later on in the week) was about an Iranian girl who wanted to be an astronaut. She had her own telescope. Her father had died, and her uncle was the head of the family. He threatened her, saying that he would definitely kill her if she did “anything wrong” while pursuing her educational goals.

People come to this conference for different reasons. Many governments and “NGO’s” are showcasing their achievements. I am interested in alternative ways of organizing economic life, so I went to a session organized by the Dominican Republic on agricultural cooperatives.

[SLIDE# __] A video (made by the D.R.’s Vice President’s office) featured some co-op members. One rural woman says, Our life was difficult before this project. Another says: We learned about healthy eating. We learned how to sell our eggplants and our lettuce. ... The community can feed itself. Her husband adds: People work for the well-being of the community. A woman in a fish culture project says, I see my fish so happy when I feed them. I feel as happy as they do!

This session conveyed a further message: that the Dominican Republic is self-sufficient in food. A Member of Parliament, Luz Adelma, said that ‘Most of the food crops in the Dominican Republic – rice and beans – are varieties locally obtained. We do not obtain any seeds.’ She made an oblique reference to “conflict” generated by the seed law, prohibiting the DR from importing any seeds. She suggested that change might occur, that, ‘The market may open internationally’, that many interests were involved.

The significance of these comments became clear to me in another session, where a woman (Mercia Andrews) working in ten southern African countries talked about the destructive effects of multi-national corporations on food and environment. African farmers – many of them, women – traditionally produce, trade and bank their own seeds. With the arrival of multinationals, however, ‘Control over distribution, production, and rehabilitation of seeds has been increasingly taken over’ by the Monsanto Corporation. Farmer-managed seed systems are no longer legal in Malawi, she said. ‘We have to make sure that our seeds are registered’. Her organization, the Rural Women’s Assembly, is resisting this move and searching for positive alternatives. ‘We continue to grow our own seeds’, she said, though they are under attack by state-supported multinationals. I asked her if her group was being sued. She said they were continuing to resist, as ‘They have no right to force us to stop growing our own seeds’. I do not know how this story will end.

[SLIDE #__] An East and Southeast Asian women’s organization organized a session on their programs in five different countries – Japan, Taiwan, Sarawak, Philippines, and New Zealand. The theme of cooperatives came up again in relation to Japan, where panelists said that many young people are returning to the land, leaving rural areas to get training in agriculture, and forming cooperatives to market their goods. A program in Taiwan trains women in home maintenance skills, using tools and methods normally controlled by men.

[SLIDE #__] I was especially interested to hear the reports of “indigenous” women. Indigenous activism got a boost from the 2010 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. This session was sponsored by an organization called The Codie Institute, which provides mentorship and training opportunities to American Indian women in the U.S. and Canada. One of

the women recited a poem, “Still I Fly,” based on “Still I Rise,” a poem by the African American writer Maya Angelou:

You may shoot me with your words,

You may cut me with your eyes.

You may kill me with your hatefulness,

But still, like air, I’ll rise.

An interesting aspect of this session was its emphasis on the emotions of socially marginalized people. One woman in the group, Patricia Thompson, introduced herself by saying, “I a a survivor. I am resilient.” Two generations ago, she explained, ‘We lost our language because of Indian children being forced to go to boarding schools’. Her father’s mother was brutally murdered. She is now a grandmother of nine. They are my legacy, the seeds I want to plant,” she exclaimed. ‘What can I do to make sure that my grandchildren do not ... feel fear or low esteem?’ she asked. ‘I want them to walk into a room with confidence. I want them to have the skills they need to nurture themselves’. Her “call to action” was: “Support each other... Help someone.... Provide presence when someone feels alone.... Provide safety when one feels helpless.”

Her co-panelist, Joline, made a statement I also heard from other indigenous speakers: “...My indigenous values and knowledge can do much for the world.” She added later, ‘We need to recognize the contributions of indigenous people, not just shed tears over their problems’.

[SLIDE# __] Another, European indigenous group represented at this conference was the Sami, reindeer herders of northern Scandinavia. The Sami women at this conference were highly organized and confident. The president of the Norwegian Sami Parliament was there. But they talked about some of the same issues that the American Indian women did, especially feelings of

shame and social disapproval. One presentation stressed the need to collect the stories of Sami families in World War II while the elders are still alive. The Sami Parliament President, Aili Keskitalo, is a sophisticated participant in these international discussions. [SLIDE# __] During a question-and-answer session, she asked Joan Carling, a Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, if it was true that she had received death threats for bringing attention to the problems of indigenous people in the Philippines. Ms. Carling said it was true. Ms. Keskitalo said to me after that meeting: “We have to do something about that Duterte,” referring to the tyrannical president of the Philippines.

Danger is a constant theme at these meetings. Women from conflict areas come seeking support from an (imagined?) international community. Two years ago I was one of only two or three Americans in a session organized by women of South Sudan. They were visibly grateful that I was there, listening to them. Afterwards they surrounded me and thanked me for coming. I felt awkward and sad, that there weren't people there with some actual influence to help them solve their terrible problems of war, displacement, and hunger.

[SLIDE# __] This year I heard passionate statements by two refugees, Ketty Nivyabandi from Burundi and Wai Wai Nu from the Rohingyas of Myanmar. Both women now live in Canada. Ms. Nivyabandi had fled Burundi in 2015 after a failed coup attempt. The head of state was illegally planning to run for a third term, and she organized the first women-only protest. One of her friends was gang-raped to death. She got out somehow, but others who remain there are being ‘thoroughly terrorized’, she said. She pleaded that, ‘Only a *global* movement for human rights can counter this kind of injustice. We need to make the human rights struggle something “normal,” something ordinary people can join, to bring about needed change’. She added with a

plea for help from the international community: ‘One country’s people cannot do it on their own’.

Wai Wai Nu’s community, the Rohingya, is now experiencing genocide. Those speaking up have been harassed and threatened. Social media are being used to humiliate activists and human rights defenders, she said. They are “criminalized” in many ways. (Joan Carling, the woman working in the Philippines, has been labelled as a “terrorist” by the Philippine authorities.) Wai Wai Nu begged us to understand the terrible risks faced by people who stand up for rights, ordinary people. “We need to come up with a strong strategy and action plan to protect women on the ground,” she said.

[SLIDE #__] One reason why women come to these meetings in New York is that they find they have better access to their own government officials than they do back home. Several speakers urged participants to meet their own governmental representatives while they were in New York, to pressure them to follow through on commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This woman from Pakistan, Yasmeen Hassan, talked about her government quickly passing a law against rape before the meeting, to improve their image in the UN setting.

[SLIDE #__] The international NGO, ActionAid, is trying to mobilize support in several countries for counting unpaid care work as part of a country’s “economy.” They have done a lot of calculation of the economic value of work such as child care, water collection, elder care, and so on. But these kinds of activities are not considered to have “economic value.” (A speaker in another session, Dr. Maria Luisa Mendonca, pointed out that small-scale agriculture also does not usually count toward a country’s GDP.)

Implementing CEDAW and other such rights agreements demands much from the states that have ratified them – sometimes more than political will allows. Most of the state signatories to CEDAW have made changes, such as establishing Ministries of Women’s Affairs and passing legislation to support women’s voting and property rights or oppose violence against women. These are slow processes, however. Nothing happens automatically. Sometimes nothing happens at all! There are economic, political, and cultural obstacles to acceptance of these rights mandates.

One issue that has come up for special scrutiny in the last 20 years or so is “female genital mutilation,” the custom (practiced widely in parts of Africa and the Middle East) of cutting out some of a girl’s genitalia. The cutting is done by other women, usually around the time of puberty or somewhat before. The practice was once called “female circumcision,” now FGM. It is an important “rite of passage” for girls in the places that follow this custom. Getting married or being accepted as a proper woman may depend on having it done. Apparently it is common for a girl to drop out of school and start her family life after going through the ceremony.

[SLIDE# __] This Maasai girl, whose name is Nice Leng’ete, has been working in her East African community to create alternatives to FGM. She has many ideas about how to persuade her people that it is harmful for girls, and that it is best for girls to stay in school rather than marrying when they are young adolescents. One of her strategies is to show boys actual pictures of the operation being performed. ‘Boys, protect your sisters’, she exclaims in one video. Her approach is to create alternative ways for school girls to transition into womanhood without FGM. She showed a picture of a group of school girls being blessed by elders. They were doing this instead of being “circumcised.” “Today we become women on the inside,” they said.

This is an interesting example of what some anthropologists have called the “vernacularization” of the global human rights discourse. An internationally disputed practice is not just banned: it is replaced with a less “harmful” practice that serves a similar social purpose. [Ref. ___ & Merry...]

[SLIDE# ___] UN Women is reaching out to private companies to promote gender equity in the workplace. Their platform of “Women’s Empowerment Principles” was featured in one of the sessions I observed. This is a somewhat unusual program, as the U.N. usually works with governments, not the private sector. In her introduction, the Chair of the Commission on the Status of Women, Geraldine Byrne Nason (delegate from Ireland), argued for “international labor standards” and “getting more women to the decision-making tables.” (This initiative is the result of collaboration between the U.N. Global Compact and U.N. Women.)

Around [1500?] companies have signed a CEO’s pledge to uphold the UN’s Women’s Empowerment Principles. Microsoft and Citibank are among them. Companies have “scored” themselves in terms of gender equity. The average score is 26 out of a possible 100 score.

Sexual harassment in the workplace was a major topic of discussion in this session: Padma Lakshmi, a well known Indian model, talked about this. She had been sexually abused as a child. “I teach my child,” she said, “that her body is her own. I don’t want to scare her.... The tools I give her will help her succeed without fear.” Padma Lakshmi was greatly impressed by Anita Hill’s revelations about Clarence Thomas’s sexual abuse when he was entering the Supreme Court in the [1970s]. (As I remember it, Anita Hill’s action led us to coin the term “sexual harassment.”) A representative of the U.S. Labor Department’s Women’s Bureau declared that, “A labor force model that isn’t working for everyone isn’t working at all.” She

argued that we need to do two things: change the model and change the dialogue. Assumptions of paid and unpaid “work” need to change.

Private companies had a chance to look good in that session, but a Brazilian activist, Dr. Maria Luisa Mendonça, talked about the expansion of large corporations into the land market after the 2008 financial collapse, especially in Brazil. Large tracts of land are used for mono-crop agriculture, mining, or other profitable enterprises. Private militias defend these activities. Local populations are driven to migrate to urban slums. Though she talked mainly about Brazil, the speaker I heard talking about southern Africa (Mercia Andrews) described a similar process. She said that southern Africa has a “resource curse.” The region attracts extractive industries, which threaten biodiversity and small-scale farming.

This conference included more discussion of United States problems than others I have attended – especially racial discrimination in the rural U.S. (the conference theme was Rural Women). At the inaugural session, an African American farmer, Ruth Faircloth, spoke about racist abuses continuing in force in her upstate New York community. Things that were “normal” 60 years ago, she said, are still happening today. If an African American person is in line at a store, she said, a White person can butt in front of them. The “N” word is still in use. Her organization helps women to vote and works on housing. Rural women are more isolated than others, and they seem to suffer more domestic violence. ‘Their men come home after humiliating work days and beat their wives, to make them feel like real men’, she said. Like some of the refugees and others I heard, she was happy to have an opportunity to speak to this international audience and seemed hopeful about getting some kind of support.

Dr. Inga Winkler – a specialist on water and sanitation – described her research in a rural Alabama community whose population is around 70% African American. She argued that forcing rural homeowners to pay for their own septic systems effectively “criminalized” rural people for their lack of public sewerage services.

American writers and leaders have inspired women in far-away places. Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and the New York political activist, Bella Abzug – all were mentioned more than once in the sessions I attended. Especially moving was the young American Indian woman I talked about earlier, who wrote her own poem based on Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise.”

[SLIDE#23] Two American cities got awards for ratifying CEDAW, despite the fact that the U.S. Congress never did ratify it. (It was signed but never ratified.²) You may be glad to hear that in San Francisco and Los Angeles CEDAW is now law.

As I reflect on this experience, it would be easy to shrug off CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, and other declarations of human rights or women’s rights as mere talk. One speaker (Agnes Kirabo, Uganda) expressed this point of view: “Our declarations on women’s issues are not at all binding,” she said. “They just let us do this so we will go home smiling.” Many of the speakers at this conference were indeed quite angry that their countries’ signing on to CEDAW etc. had not actually produced real gender equality and elimination of violence against women. Since 1975 and into the 1990s there has been a concerted effort to inform more and more women of the “rights” that their countries have supposedly granted them. The more they learn about these apparently empty gestures, the angrier they get. But I think this righteous anger may be a good thing in the end.

There is a serious need for cultural fine-tuning, but the world is smaller and smaller.

Almost everyone is now subject to the same global political and economic pressures. It may be high time to get real about some basic human rights. If their governments won't do it for them, perhaps women and their organizations can do it for themselves.

ENDNOTES

1. The 45 members of the Commission on the Status of Women are selected as follows:

- 13 members from Africa
- 11 from Asia
- Nine from Latin America and Caribbean
- Eight from Western Europe and other States
- Four from Eastern Europe

2. Iran, Sudan, Somalia, Tonga, and Palua are the only other countries that have not ratified CEDAW.