

# United Nations Commission on the Status of Women 57, on the ELIMINATION and PREVENTION of VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN and CHILDREN

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## BACKGROUND

I applied and was selected by the International Federation of University Women (IFUW), an NGO, as one of 20 delegates (the UN sets the number of delegates to which a NGO is entitled) to attend the Commission of the Status of Women CSW57 (United Nations) in New York on the Elimination and Prevention of Violence Towards Women and Children from 4 to 15 March 2013. I attended the first week. My particular interest is domestic violence and abuse. I was self-funded with support from Graduate Women Victoria and Australian Federation of Graduate Women; many thanks to these two organisations.

There were 8,800+ mainly women, some men and children from countries all over the world, pre-registered to attend this session. CSW57 was the largest worldwide gathering ever held on ending violence against women and children.

Unlike IFUW many individuals and organisations who attended CSW57 were not linked to a UN recognised Non-Government Organisation. These individuals and organisations did not have access to the NGO Ground Pass which enabled attendance at any relevant event held in the UN proper.

The main aim of the CSW57 was to sign off on Agreed Conclusions by the member states to then be formally endorsed by the United Nations. In the last two years of CSW no Agreed Conclusions were reached so the pressure was really on particularly as, early in the process, it seemed that there could never be any agreement as countries took opposing views.

## PREPARATION

I found it very difficult to prepare and obtain information regarding the complex procedures of the UN and CSW. Delegates were expected to download all information. An individual really needed to know the relevant jargon in order to search for information. The CSW website was not user friendly. Much important information was not available until the last week before the sessions started. No papers were received at registration. Without the preparation and links to the Australian Delegation and help from previous attendees I would not have been able to plan and gain the wide experiences I managed to achieve.

During about the last 10 days before CSW started I downloaded a copy of the provisional agenda and other papers including 230+ statements written by NGO's from a huge variety of

organisations. The representation of diverse organisations with varying allegiances from many countries was to me astounding. IFUW's statement was included as were statements from expected organisations like Amnesty International. A few examples of other organisations represented are:

- African Centre for Community and Development
- AWAZ
- Captive Daughters
- Chinese Society for Sustainable Development
- Dayemi Complex Bangladesh
- Federation of Women Lawyers Kenya
- Legal Aid Forum for Human Rights
- Medical Women's International Association
- Centre for Development Services Dhammakaya Foundation
- Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations
- Federation of Cuban Women
- New Future Foundation
- New Japan Women's Association
- Smile Foundation
- Widows Rights International
- World Organization against Torture
- Womensport International
- World Society of Victimology
- Zenab for Women in Development Inc

These made fascinating reading as each organisation put forward their main concerns and ideas for the future. Many focused on theoretical reasons why violence against women and children occurs. They really gave me a feel for the areas and complexities of the concerns around the world. The problems are so diverse and so huge that at this point it was easy to feel helpless and believe that the problem was so large that nothing could ever be changed. Then I experienced CSW57, with so many impressive individuals and organisations all fighting for a similar outcome and heard youth presenters from around world and I was led to believe that anything was possible.

#### ATTENDANCE AT FUNCTIONS

There were 3 types of official sessions running concurrently. There was the main event in the United Nations General Assembly where, during the first week, countries presented their ideas and commitment to the elimination and prevention of violence towards women and children. In order to attend any CSW event in the UN proper an IFUW Ground Pass was

necessary to pass through UN security. I personally was able to attend 5 sessions plus International Women's Day, in the General Assembly. The sessions were divided into morning and afternoon.

There were the Side Events (1-3 running concurrently) usually run by a government and an NGO and there were Parallel Events (3 venues with a combined total of 12 sessions every 2 hours from 8.30am to 8.30pm). I made the decision to remain at one venue rather than waste time travelling by either walking or catching a taxi from venue to venue. I found this was the correct decision as experienced attendees often followed this tactic. Preparation and organisation were essential in order to create my individual timetable to maximise my attendance at CSW events. There were also social events to which I was invited and attended. I made the decision very early on that I would attend as much as possible.

The Sunday before the sessions started there was a NGO Consultation Day which cost US\$100. This was, for me who had not attended CSW before, a must attend briefing. At this function attendees did receive a comprehensive booklet on the Parallel Events and other interesting information. My main interest has always been in ideas for practical outcomes. I have read the theories but theory does not stop the violence or support or change the lives of women and children who have been violated in any way. All countries need to individually create practical ideas for change for a particular culture. I was very pleased to note that the predominant message for the day was that CSW57 should focus on practical outcomes not theory. On this day there were two very practical and interesting initiatives explained and which were already in practice from two diverse countries, India and USA. (See reference following.)

There were also regional briefings which were important to attend or gain access to the information. IFUW ran one breakfast briefing session and a dinner and delegates were expected to write of their experiences for the IFUW blog. I stayed at the OneUN Millenium Hotel which is central to all venues including the United Nations. I met attendees in corridors, lifts, the street, cafes, shops etc and discussed relevant topics of interest with women and young people from many countries and diverse organisations. As IFUW delegates were given IFUW nametags I was able to provide a synopsis about IFUW to people I met. This in itself was great advertising for IFUW. Delegations were having briefing sessions in any area they could find including corridors, alcoves and of course the hotel lounge which was usually packed with CSW attendees. I found it very difficult to attend all the events and functions I would have wished to attend. There were just so many interesting topics, presenters and organisations and social events.

I must add that New York had a major snow storm on the last full day I was there. What an experience that was to watch the storm come in from my 33<sup>rd</sup> floor room. As an Australian who has never experienced snow like this it added in some ways the surreal experience that was CSW57. I cannot say I enjoyed walking through the ice and snow the next morning.

## OFFICIAL EVENTS I ATTENDED

The IFUW parallel event *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls: Effective Practices & The Potential for Creating Positive Social Change* was of a very high standard with a lot of useful information. Among the speakers it was very pleasing to have a male, H. E. Ambassador Usman Sarki: Deputy Permanent Representative of Nigeria to the United Nations speaking about *The Implementation of Existing Norms*. Full credit is due to whoever organised this session. I felt proud to be an IFUW delegate at this session.

The Side Events, many of which were held on UN secure premises, were varied. Each event had a different ticketing format. These tickets were difficult to access and generally an individual had to book early or join long queues at Registration or immediately before the session. For those held on UN premises I needed to know when I would have access to an IFUW Grounds Pass, which wasn't the case, so it was easier to concentrate on attendance at the Parallel Events and the United Nations General Assembly. The topics of the Parallel Events organised by many and varying politically and culturally organisations were very wide ranging and practically based and of enormous value and interest. Some of the topics from the 63 Parallel events on offer for one day were:

- Status of Women and Girls in the Post Arab Spring World by the Al-Khoel Foundation
- Ni una mas! Not One More! Resilience and Resistance to Eliminate Femicide and Human Trafficking by the Federation of Cuban Women World March of Women, Cuban Interests Section in Washington DC
- Strengthening Preventive Actions to Curb Conflict-Related Violence Against Women by Femmes Africa Solidarite
- When Violence Continues in Court: Family Courts, Custody Cases and Protecting Mothers, Roles by the National Organisation for Women's Shelters and Young Women's Shelters in Sweden
- Stopping the Violence – Screening of "It's a Girl" Documentary on Gendercide, Women's Rights Without Frontiers by European Dignity Watch
- The Future Young Women Want: Putting Women's Rights at the Heart of the Post-2015 Development Agenda by World YWCA, UNFPA
- Violence against Women in the Name of God: Who interprets the Sacred Texts by the National Council of Women of Canada
- Violence Against Women in War Zones: Prescription for Ending Systemic Failures in Preventing War Crimes by KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights
- The Economics of Domestic Violence by The Haven, Wolverhampton
- Prevention and Protection of Sexually Exploited Girls in Immigrant Communities in the US by ECPPAT-USA

- Women's Economic Empowerment and Equal Opportunities in Private and Public Sectors by Women Entrepreneurs Association of Turkey
- Interrupting the Continuum of Gender and Sexually-Based Violence in the Pacific by Fiji Rights Movement(FWRM) and Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)
- Creating Economic Opportunity for GBV Survivors in Haiti: A For-Profit/Not-Profit/NGO Hybrid Approach by Church Women United, Prosperity Candle
- The European Parliament's Role in the Struggle Against Violence Against Women by the European Parliament
- Faith's Response to Domestic Violence by the United Methodist Women
- Hate Crime: Violence Against Those with Disabilities by National Alliance of Women's Organisations & Hope International Iraq
- Sharing Responsibilities for VAW Elimination by the Forum of women's NGO's of Kyrgyzstan
- 16 Days Campaign Open Forum by the Centre for Women's Global Leadership
- We Can End all Violence Against Women – People's Journey for Change by MOVISIE Netherlands and PCVC India
- Feminist Activism Against Gender-Based Violence: Chinese Experience by OXFAM Hong Kong Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era

## INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

I was lucky enough to obtain one of the IFUW Ground Passes to attend International Women's Day in the UN. What a wonderful positive experience this event was! The speakers and atmosphere were inspiring.

Among the International Women's Day speakers were Isha Sesay, an English Journalist from CNN International, Michelle Bachelet UN Women Executive Director, and last but not least Ban Ki-Moon Secretary General of the UN. There were many messages including those of hope and those of outrage and that we must focus on a promise to end violence towards women and a call for action to make a difference.

Ban Ki-Moon commented that the room was too small to accommodate everyone who wished to attend (there were many people standing outside the windows watching the proceedings as well as the packed assembly) and that snow was an auspicious omen. He congratulated everyone from the bottom of his heart, and along with other statements said violence is not inevitable and that ending violence is a social and human rights issue. He called for no more silence and no more stigma. Michelle Bachelet said that 'enough is enough', never before have women, men and boys joined together with so many young people rising up saying NO to discrimination and violence against women and children, domestic violence and abuse, rape and sexual violence, human trafficking and sexual

slavery, female genital mutilation, child brides and marriage, honour killings, femicide, impunity – YES to peace, human rights, justice and equality – the UN must listen. The theme song - We Are One Woman with 25 different artists from 20 countries was introduced. (<http://song.unwomen.org/>)

## ELIMINATION AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE TOWARDS WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Violence against women and children takes on many physically and mentally destructive forms and once studying the problem from a worldwide perspective the problems become overwhelming and a feeling of hopelessness tends to take over. Whether it is:

- rape of women and children used as a tool of war
- rape of women and girls
- female genital mutilation
- a young girl being shot because she tried to attend school in Pakistan
- a beautiful 13 year old Afghani girl standing at a CSW57 event stating that all she wants is to go to school and get an education
- rape and killings in India
- female babies having no value to the point that female foetuses are aborted
- female babies left to die because they have no value
- girls being fed less than boys because they are seen as not as valuable
- honour killings
- child sexual exploitation
- female trafficking as sex slaves through gangs in USA
- date rape which is prevalent in the college scene in USA
- forced marriage often of children
- rape of girls as young as 6 because the male believes that 'having' a virgin will cure Aids
- human trafficking women for sex slaves or servants
- second World War 2 comfort women from Korea still presenting their stories 50+ years on
- abuse of some of the most vulnerable people in a community - the aged, the disabled in care
- migrant and displaced women in a foreign country with little or no language to even look for help
- sexual harassment
- discrimination and bullying
- women who lose status and so much more as widows
- the new form of abuse created through the new communication technology of facebook, twitter etc

- one of the most contentious issues at CSW57 - women's rights over their own bodies and
- the most insidious and universal of them all domestic violence and abuse carried on usually behind closed doors in a 'marital' home which should be a safe and loving environment which is prevalent in developed, developing and un-developed countries, a universal problem crossing all social strata across the world.

All these issues were discussed and referred to in many presentations. What hope has the world got when women and children are not protected within the community in which they live? It may be seen as a cliché that all these violated women who have lived through a horrific event are not just victims they are also survivors. It is most important to use the more positive appellation of 'survivor'. We also must not forget the huge financial cost to every country created by the wide ranging effects of violence against women and children. There is a dearth of worthwhile statistics as there are no figures from some countries and most others do not have accurate historical or current figures from which to build.

## THE FUTURE

But there is hope for the future. CSW57 proved this. CSW57 is where so many countries showed their commitment by sending high ranking government officials to present their countries' statements of support to eliminate and prevent violence towards women and children. I personally heard 79 countries make their reports. I was reminded again and again of the diverse understanding, the complex problems facing many nations and the variety of strategies required at the most basic level. Unfortunately I was unable to hear Australia's representative The Hon Julie Collins MP, Minister for the Status of Women give her speech.

More than 300 worldwide organisations and 8,800+ individual women, men and children stood together and said we can do something and we will. Then there was the constant exchange of ideas and interaction between individuals and organisations. There was around CSW57 an extraordinary energy which was harnessed into a commitment for change and the constant exchange of ideas by organisations and individuals.

The atmosphere in New York was inspiring as organisations and individuals put forward idea after idea as to how to make a difference and how to eliminate and prevent violence towards women and children and most importantly how to support women and children who have been abused or violated in any way. There are no easy solutions but there was a general agreement that we have to make a start.

## PRACTICAL IDEAS

There were a few stand out ideas presented over and over again. Every country has to have relevant legislation against all forms of violence towards women and children. These laws have to be backed up by law enforcers, legal systems and the community. It is no good having a law if that law is ignored by the law enforcers and the legal professionals. Women have to be supported by practical systems within the community and money supplied by governments for support programmes. Without support violated women can be ostracised and isolated within their communities and in the case of domestic violence and abuse single women can face enormous financial hardship to the point they are unable to support their children. Most importantly men have to step forward and make a stand. We need to talk about domestic abuse and violence and bring it out into the open. The culture of silence has to cease. The problem is not a women's problem it is everyone's problem. Men and women have to unite to create change. We must talk about it and just not let it stay behind closed doors. These were very strong messages from CSW57.

EDUCATION in all its forms was seen as a major tool to change lives and cultural attitudes including scholarships for the disadvantaged. Any scholarship can make a huge difference to the life of the violated or abused. This was mentioned many times in different formats including by the representative of Mauritania, by the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, Soroptimist International and the Economic Committee of West African States referred to the economic empowering of women and girls through scholarships and education. The general message was that a scholarship does not need to be a huge amount of money, even a small amount can really make a difference and help someone move forward. This was particularly interesting as this backed up Graduate Women Victoria's experience with our scholarship programme for disadvantaged women, which we have run since 2002.

I believe that CSW57 had another effect and that was to make countries start talking about the issues. I know in Australia I had never seen the amount of media, newspaper and television, coverage on this topic as I did leading up to CSW57 and afterwards. This was at least in part of the excellent work of the Australian delegation which was a positive force at CSW57.

The Circle of 6 Phone App designed by a team of young people for young people, has won awards. The Circle of 6 is designed for College students in the USA 'to connect with 6 friends to stay close, stay safe and prevent violence before it happens' The App, free to download, makes it quick and easy to reach 6 chosen friends. 'Need help getting home? Need an interruption? Two touches lets your circle know where you are and how they can help.' By CSW57, this Phone App had gone to 26 countries. I have forwarded this to my granddaughter. See <http://www.circleof6app.com/>

The Ring the Bell video campaign in India was a stand-out initiative: 'One Million Men One Million Promises to end violence against women. What's yours?' This campaign runs from 8<sup>th</sup> March 2013 to 8<sup>th</sup> March 2014. See <http://www.bellbajao.org/> A series of videos has



been made and shown on Indian television channels. All had a similar theme: there was domestic abuse going on behind a closed door, a male rang the doorbell thus halting the abuse. Each video has a comic twist. This campaign has since grown. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tv5Qxpiz-Y4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tv5Qxpiz-Y4))

There was a 16 year old girl guide Brownie Leader from Britain who had created a programme which she had started to implement with Brownies to teach and create discussion as to acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour regarding bullying and abuse. She gained permission from the Brownies' parents and ran the programme after which the parents reported back that the girls were discussing all sorts of relevant issues and were much more aware. There was the indigenous woman from Lifeline Australia who spoke about a Lifeline phone number for domestic abuse for Australian indigenous women. There was the New Zealand group which had set up culturally sensitive support services for abused women.

Of course there was the very novel idea, to many people, that Australia, in particular Victoria, already had in place a system where the male in a domestic abuse situation was ordered by the courts, enforced by police, to vacate the home leaving the women and children in the family home. An Intervention Order is then available to protect the woman, and children, not permitting him to come within a specified distance of the woman or home. We heard that this initiative has been taken up by Finland.

Then there was the group of female medicos from the Medical Women's International Association, operating in Africa including Tanzania, who medically support young girls such as an 11 year old who had been raped on the day one medico left for New York. There are references from many countries to the 4Ps campaign – Prevention, Protection, Partnership, Programmes. These are just a few examples.

From a practical viewpoint I have always been very critical of Australia's systems which, in reality, do not always support the mother who is trying to exit an abusive and violent situation. The Child Support system only works if the father is honest and wishes to support his children. In reality there are so many ways that he can avoid paying child support, the support systems which are in place often only further traumatise an already traumatised woman who has often been abused for many years. There are many very knowledgeable and sympathetic individuals within the system but they are controlled by policy decisions. What is unsettling is that Australia is at the forefront worldwide of systems which are in place to support and help women.

I cannot explain the atmosphere during the first week of CSW57 other than to say the place was buzzing and totally energising. A person could really believe that positive change was a possibility. An individual went away with a real hope for the future. I honestly believe that with enough support we can 'MAKE A DIFFERENCE' but the impetus put into place at CSW57 has to carry into the future.

## AGREED CONCLUSIONS

The official Agreed Conclusions are lengthy, detailed, extensive and too complex to discuss within this article. The conclusions can be found and are well worth reading at <http://www.un.org/womensatcl> . The conclusions encompass every issue that I heard discussed at CSW57, most particularly the importance of collecting relevant data to underpin any initiative. There are many international laws and conventions in place and they are referred to at the beginning of the CSW57 Agreed Conclusions, not the least of these being that abuse and violence are violations of the Human Rights Convention. One of the most significant breakthroughs was the inclusion and recognition that custom, tradition or religious consideration should play no part in denying women equality or justifying violence against them. The CSW57 Agreed Conclusions can now be another powerful tool to oblige countries to take seriously the Elimination and Prevention of Violence Towards Women and Children. According to paragraph 30 of the Agreed Conclusions 'ending violence against women and girls is imperative and must be a priority for the eradication of poverty, the achievement of inclusive sustainable development, peace and security, human rights, health, gender equality and empowerment of women, sustainable and inclusive economic growth and social cohesion, and vice versa'.

The Agreed Conclusions will now be included in the Commission's Report to ECOSOC (which will sit in Geneva in July) for formal endorsement. Credit goes to all the negotiators who managed to find the wording which finally did gain agreement.

## IFUW's ROLE

IFUW delegates came from a variety of countries including Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Netherlands, Austria, Zambia, Niger, Turkey, Mexico, Finland, Bangladesh, Switzerland, Great Britain plus various UN representatives. IFUW has had official UN designated NGO status, since about 1947, and as such delegates, after personal security clearance, plus the UN NGO Ground Pass (IFUW had 2 to share amongst the 20 delegates) could attend CSW sessions in the United Nations General Assembly. Some delegates wore 2 hats which freed up the Ground Passes.

IFUW as one of the truly international delegations had a wonderful opportunity to lobby Member States regarding negotiations for the Agreed Conclusions. It is probable that some IFUW delegates were lobbying individually but unfortunately as the IFUW delegation never came together as an identity I personally had no impact on any of these conclusions and followed the negotiations in any way available. CSW within the UN had closed sessions which were only able to be attended by the Member States so disappointingly NGO delegates were not permitted to attend any of these discussions. I joined unofficial discussion groups whenever possible.

A dominant message from CSW was the importance of education to further its aims. From my viewpoint IFUW missed a wonderful opportunity to make a significant impact, firstly by lobbying, secondly by promoting educationally based initiatives, and in acting to formally link with other organisations with similar philosophies making an impact into the future and to further advertise IFUW as an influential identity.

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