

Hayley Richardson on the successes and challenges of CSW58
Speech given to the Women's Advisory Council of UNA
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Thank you for the invitation and providing me with the opportunity to report back on the 58th session of the Commission on the Status of Women or CSW. I thought I'd share a bit of background as to UNA-UK's preparation for CSW and some of my own personal reflections on the experience. Then I'd like to update you on the substance and outcomes of the conference, which were on the whole quite positive.

This year's CSW theme was "the challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls". This comes at a key moment at the UN, as over the course of the next year the international community will set and adopt sustainable development goals to replace the MDGs, known as the post-2015 framework.

CSW's aim each year, as the main UN forum for the discussion of women's rights, is to agree a resolution by consensus (either called an outcome document or the agreed conclusions) through which the global community ostensibly speaks with one voice on that particular year's theme.

Ahead of the conference, we decided to consult UNA-UK's members and supporters, as well as the branches, regions and nations, to get a sense of the concerns of the membership and their thoughts on how we should prioritise our advocacy on what was a very broad agenda – women's rights and international development.

We had a fantastic response: over 300 votes were taken on our online poll, and around 150 personalised messages and emails were received raising a range of issues. We hope to release the results on our website, but it is safe to say that education, time and again, topped the list of respondents' concerns.

With this input from the membership, UNA-UK sent its thoughts on the draft outcome document to the UK Government ahead of the conference to inform their preparations.

In theory I was now fully prepared, but, the first problem that I encountered in New York was a purely practical one. How on earth do you navigate CSW? The conference is genuinely enormous. There were:

- over 6,000 NGO delegates
- up to another 2,000 people there as part of member state delegations, UN staff or from regional organisations
- In the first week there were over 100 UN or member state side events
- as well as over 300 NGO side events
- In addition there were caucus meetings, conversation circles, bilateral meetings, receptions. It is non-stop.

So I took at least a day to get my bearings. In fact it took a morning alone to get my grounds pass for entry to the UN!

So my first impression of CSW was that not only is getting to New York a difficult and costly exercise, but once there, getting around the conference itself was a challenge! In terms of civil society access, it must be a seemingly insurmountable obstacle for those grassroots activists from developing countries.

On top of that, actually getting to where the action is – the negotiations room where member states debate the outcome document for the conference – is nigh on impossible. It should be noted that CSW is an intergovernmental process, and whether fair or not NGOs attend as the UN's welcome guests.

So at first glance, much of CSW can appear to be a side show to the main event of the negotiations. I don't wish to undermine the work of the activists and NGOs that were there (myself included). But I do think that if you invest time and money in going, it's important to think critically about the process and how to achieve impact.

One of the most useful outcomes of gathering 6,000 people is to very vocally set out your demands. On this particular year's theme there was almost complete agreement on exactly what the world's women's expected of their governments – a call for a standalone goal on gender equality in the post-2015 framework. Side events give NGOs the opportunity to invite member state delegates and UN experts and hold them captive to talk through their concerns. If member states were to agree something fundamentally at odds with the priorities of civil society it would be a very public failure on a global stage.

In terms of the UK Government's engagement with CSW, I'm told this year was a high water mark for the UK at the conference. In attendance was: Justine Greening, Secretary of State for International Development, Maria Miller, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and Minister for Women and Equalities, Lynne Featherstone, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for International Development leading on violence against women and girls, five parliamentarians (Baroness Hodgson, Baroness Prosser, Mary Macleod, Sharon Hodgson and Roberta Blackman-Woods) as well as staff from the Department for International Development, the Government Equalities Office and the UK Mission in New York.

Months ahead of the conference, the Government Equalities Office liaised with UK civil society by holding preparatory meetings with the UK NGO CSW Alliance, a loose network of UK NGOs engaging with CSW, including UNA-UK. At the conference, the Alliance held daily morning strategy meetings, and in the evenings the UK Mission in New York hosted the NGOs to provide them with an update on negotiations and for the NGOs to raise any concerns they may have. This level of engagement was well received, and indeed has been raised as a model by other states for working with civil society partners.

In assessing whether CSW was a success or not this year, it may be helpful to remind ourselves of some of the background in lead up to the conference. Firstly, it's important to note that across all UN forums and bodies, there is generally perceived to be pushback underway by those states unhappy with the progression and proliferation of human rights treaties in recent years. This has perhaps been oversimplified as a battle between those who endorse universal human rights on the one side, and those who favour so-called "traditional values" on the other.

As we know, nowhere is this debate more fiercely contested than over women's rights – CEDAW has more reservations to it than any other convention. And the last two CSW's have been especially contentious. In 2012 when the seemingly innocuous theme was “the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication”, member states were unable to come to any agreement, and as a consensus-based process, the conference failed to produce an outcome document. Last year, the more provocative theme of violence against women led to very heated negotiations, which were only saved by the conference chair who at the last minute tabled her own “take it or leave it” version of the outcome document, which thankfully was agreed to.

Against this backdrop, expectations were arguably even greater this year, as the hope was by feeding into the global post-2015 debate, a positive result at the conference would greatly improve the prospect of gender equality featuring strongly in any future development framework.

The first draft of the outcome document, released shortly before the conference, was a pretty positive opening gambit. It was seven pages long and largely based on an excellent report by the secretary-general. The second draft however, after member states had added all their amendments, was 47 pages long. Some of the major sticking points included:

- **Sexual and reproductive health and rights:** as in previous years, was a major bone of contention. Interestingly this was apparently the first time the EU states, which always work collectively at CSW, were able to find consensus amongst themselves on this issue, with Malta and Hungary being notably conservative in this area. The Vatican came forward with a late push for the removal of any reference to condoms, and stated “abstinence was the only cure for HIV”
- **Sexual orientation and gender identity:** seen as a trojan horse for LGBT rights, this was a non-starter for conservative states, who preferred non-specific language on “marginalised and vulnerable groups”
- **Any reference to women's rights:** African states in particular argued that development and the MDGs is not a ‘rights issue’
- **The importance of the family:** pushed heavily by the traditional values alliance, meant as solely a mother, father and children. Belarus tried to insert language referring to women as “the reproductive unit of the family”.
- **Funding for women's organisations:** the US and other Western states attempted to water down calls for increased funding to women's rights organisations

After a solid week of negotiators staying up until the early hours debating every last word (the UK said their mantra was “to disagree without being disagreeable”), I'm pleased to report that CSW adopted agreed conclusions! The final document (down to 24 pages) has been well received. Some highlights include:

- The main objective was achieved - the document includes a clear call for a standalone goal on gender equality to be included in the post-2015 framework and for gender targets and indicators to underpin all other goals

- There is a lot of language about the failings of the MDGs for women and the major gaps to be plugged by any future framework (many of which were raised as concerns by UNA-UK members in our consultation) including: violence against women and girls; child, early and forced marriage; women's and girls' disproportionate share of unpaid work, the gender wage gap, low paid and gender-stereotyped work; women's equal access to, control and ownership of assets and resources; women's sexual and reproductive health, and reproductive rights, women's full and equal participation in decision-making at all levels
- The reference to sexual and reproductive health and rights was weaker than hoped, but includes a list of the services women require, as well as strong language on a woman's right to make her own decisions free from coercion, discrimination, and violence
- The Commission recognised the need for gender equality, the empowerment of women and the realisation of human rights of women and girls, called for concrete measures to transform discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes

I thoroughly recommend you read the outcome document – I think you'll be pleased with what you find. UN member states have sent a clear signal that any set of ambitious development goals will never be fully achieved without first realising the rights of women.