



## Reflections on the 60<sup>th</sup> UN Commission on the Status of Women

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The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women's 60<sup>th</sup> Session in New York was a revelation on how we negotiate for women's rights.

For an idealist the process can be quite confronting as it dawns, pretty soon, that any progressive language that may substantially impact the realisation of women's and girl's human rights will never find consensus. If you are a pragmatist, like me, you will just about survive if you keep telling yourself that the only way to reach the goal of gender equality is to keep chipping away at the foundations of inequality. It is a roller coaster ride of emotions – there were times when I was angry and frustrated that we still have to negotiate to secure fundamental human rights and freedoms for women and girls. At other times I sat there incredulous and amused at abject lack of knowledge amongst those negotiating for the rights of women and girls.

Then there were times when I was moved by the passion and sophisticated articulation of why women and girls are central to achieving the sustainable development goals. And there were times for hope when hearing about the tireless campaigns and projects focusing on realisation of human rights for all women and girls.

Hope, I think was the overwhelming emotion during the first week at CSW60 (14<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> March 2016). The World YWCA CSW60 delegation's breakfast with the Australian delegation was hosted by our Global Ambassador for Women and Girls, Ms. Natasha Stott Despoja and Her Excellency Ms Gillian Bird, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Australia to the United Nations. The meeting presented an opportunity to discuss and share best practices advancing gender equality. Personal stories of courage, determination and commitment to working for women's and girl's empowerment from Solomon Islands and PNG peer educators (YWCA's *Rise Up! Young Women's Leadership Program*) set the tone for the meeting. The discussions ranged from expectations from CSW60's Agreed Conclusions to how programs like *Rise Up!* are changing and shaping the lives of young women and girls to the first ever Youth Forum held as part of CSW60.

There was buzz and energy around youth participation in CSW60. The Y and Girl Guides have always sent strong delegations to CSW. This time they went a step further. It was not just about hosting side events but about pushing participation to the next level and getting a foot in the door. A demand to be recognised as a force to contend with and without whose active and substantive participation realising the SDGs will remain a pipe dream.

The *Youth Forum Advancing Agenda 2030 - Empowered Young Women and Young Men as Partners in Achieving Gender Equality* (11-12 March) was this year's flagship event at CSW. Strategically held before the start of CSW60 and organised by UN Women, YWCA and the Inter-agency Network on Youth's Development Working Group, the forum provided a safe space for young women and girls, young men and boys to discuss, debate, strategise, network and build alliances to advance a gender responsive approach to achieving Agenda 2030.

The [YouthCSW Declaration on Gender Equality and the Human Rights of Young Women and Girls](#) is a powerful statement calling for the recognition of diverse expressions of gender, realisation of sexual and reproductive rights, impacts of climate change and the importance of youth participation in leadership and decision-making. I simply LOVE the fact that the statement begins



by defining gender – something I think every CSW Agreed Conclusions should do; to serve as reminder that we actually understand what we mean by gender – given the tendency for delegation negotiators to conflate sex and gender and use the terms interchangeably.

The strong YouthCSW presence and proactive participation resulted in another first ever, which was them making a [statement at the opening session of CSW60](#). This forum is a force to be reckoned with and it must have been obvious to the official delegations at this year's CSW.

Another win for youth-led organisations is an explicit mention of such groups in Agreed Conclusion (21) which welcomes the major contributions of civil society organisations, among others:

*...youth led organizations, in placing the interests, needs and visions of women and girls on local, national, regional and international agendas, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and recognizes the importance of having an open, inclusive and transparent engagement with them in the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.*

Now that CSW60 has concluded and we have a set of Agreed Conclusions, how did we do? In the coming months there will be much analysis of this text. Australia's priority areas as shared with the CSOs during our first meeting in New York were:

- Ensuring that CSW had a significant role to play in the review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through the UN High Level Political Forum and remains relevant beyond 2030 – (Agreed Conclusions, 30)
- Maintaining a strong focus on the need to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls if the SDGs are to be achieved and gender equality and women and girl's empowerment is to be realised – (Agreed Conclusions 15; *Strengthening normative, legal and policy frameworks* (r))
- Advocating for the participation of National Human Rights Institutions in their own right at CSW – (Agreed Conclusions, 29)
- Advancing women's economic empowerment as one of the means to realise of gender equality and sustainable development – (Agreed Conclusions, 11 which includes a recognition of the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work done by women; *Strengthening normative, legal and policy frameworks* (e) which references "equal opportunities for full and productive employment and decent work" and (f) which in addition to women's rights at work emphasises "equal pay for equal work or/and work of equal value")

Australia also strongly supported the call to:

- Recognise the contributions of indigenous women and rural women to sustainable development and address the significant discriminations they face – (Agreed Conclusions, *Strengthening normative, legal and policy frameworks* (v) and (u) respectively)
- Acknowledge the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities – (Agreed Conclusions, *Strengthening normative, legal and policy frameworks* (w))
- Recognise and support women's agency in addressing climate change (Agreed Conclusions, 14; *Strengthening normative, legal and policy frameworks* (l))



- Address differential pricing of goods and services intended for or marketed to women and girls, popularly referred to as the “pink tax” (*Strengthening normative, legal and policy frameworks (j)*)
- Include women’s human right’s defenders as an important part of civil society organisations working to achieve Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (Agreed Conclusions 21)

Where we failed to make any dent in progressing the agenda was on issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity, and sexual and reproductive rights. These will continue to remain contentious issues where no consensus will be reached as long as countries continue to criminalise homosexuality. Fierce battles were fought to prevent the addition of caveats such as “taking into account different national realities,” “respecting national policy space,” and “bearing in mind national priorities,” which allow countries to opt out of addressing substantive rights issues claiming that they are not in the national interest. We succeeded in some places but not others. Our inability to either remove the reference to “family” (note usage in the singular) or at the minimum diversify the concept to include different kinds of families (note plural) was a major setback as it entrenches and privileges a hegemonic, patriarchal, homophobic view of a social institution that plays a significant role in enabling or hindering the empowerment of women and girls.