



Report on the activities of the  
SWS – delegation Akron  
53<sup>rd</sup> Session of the Committee on the Status of Women

03/08/2009-03/11/2009

UN Headquarters  
New York City, NY

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Akron, 4/03/2009

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### **Intro - Personal Reflections on the Meetings**

*Sarah Swider*

The meetings were an amazing and overwhelming event. The most important part of our experience included the numerous women who have been participating for years in these meetings. It was them who took the time to share their experiences and teach us about the process and the way to maneuver effectively around the meetings. Among the many women who shared their expertise, I would like to extend a special thank you to SWS member Susan Lee at the University of Boston and Leslie Wright from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). This process of Non Governmental Organization's (NGO) influencing UN activity is one that has been hard fought by women from across the world and the knowledge of how it works and how they participate is taught hands-on in the meetings. This is an important reason for SWS to continue our participation, and give opportunities of political socialization to members who will join the prospective meetings.

At the center of the meeting was the democratic process of consensus used to produce the "Agreed Conclusions," a written document of conclusions and agreements on gender equality that evolves out of every annual session. The United Nations (UN) meetings were interesting in that we could observe how different countries attempted to use the opportunity to meet their specific interests. We also attended caucuses, briefing and strategizing meetings held by NGO representatives. These meetings gave us an understanding of what was important to women in other countries and how their countries were working to either further or hinder gender equality.

*Dani Jauk*

If I was to describe the value of my participation in the 53<sup>rd</sup> session of the Committee on the Status of Women (CSW) as short as possible, I would say: intense, fulfilling, exciting, multilayered learning experience. The highly dynamic conference involving several hundred individuals, and the complex bureaucracy enabling the shaping of global normative guidelines, are per se powerful. Conflicts of interests occur hereby not only on the levels of nations. Having observed how (also conservative and fundamentalist) women from different

backgrounds struggling through a draft of agreed conclusions, I am thrown back to my own subjectivity, and have a more de-romanticized view about “global feminisms.”

De-romanticized is also my understanding of the participation of the NGO’s in this process. Their vibrant work and networking is not a fully legitimized one, based on accounts of NGO-representatives who got thrown out of meetings, or do not get earplugs to follow the discussion. In this light, it is even more fulfilling that with this trip it was possible to enable 10 working class students from a small town in Ohio to be right in the middle of UN core meetings. In my role as teaching assistant I had the chance to learn invaluable lessons about classroom organization in such an experimental setting from Dr. Swider, who mentored me via formal and informal guidance throughout these days. This extra space with the SWS faculty advisor for meta-discussions about the class, but also the meetings and international gender politics itself, will always remain one of my most impressive learning experiences.

## **Participation in events**

*Monday, 03/09/2009*

- Morning Briefing with national delegates

This was a formal briefing during which country delegates made statements regarding their countries’ efforts to improve the situation facing women. Of the 19 speakers this morning 10 were male bodied. It was clear that some delegates used the opportunity to exploit their participation in the Commission as a way to claim legitimate efforts in the advancement of women, despite their dismal records on gender equality and women’s rights. In this sense, it was a bit disappointing and boring but very educational for my students.

- ECO Meeting

In an earlier caucus meeting the NGO representatives mentioned that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were having a briefing meeting for the Council on Economic and Social Development. They advised attendance since one of the emerging issues (and next year’s priority theme) for CSW is gendered perspectives on the financial crisis. We attended the meeting, which was upstairs in a slightly smaller but more elaborate meeting room. The IMF and World Bank proceeded to explain why no one could have predicted the financial crisis and why it could not have been prevented (“There was too little information”). The speakers could also not give a sketch on the global impact and effects of the crisis (“It is very difficult to pull the statistics together”). Various country delegates call into question these claims and suggested that the burden of reform and relief falls in the hands of Western countries, particularly the United States. Overall, it was disheartening in how glibly the IMF and World Bank dismissed their role and responsibility in the crisis.

- US Caucus meeting

This meeting prepared us for meeting with the delegates the next day. It was crucial to attend, since the meeting time and location with US delegates was not posted anywhere. The meeting reviewed the draft of Agreed Conclusions and scrutinized changes suggested by US delegates. Many of the representatives had already met with the delegates once and seemed to be a bit disappointed at the US delegates’ apparent attempt to water down the language in the

document. Examples include replacing “recognizes” with the word “note,” or replacing “ratify” with “consider as a matter of priority, ratifying,” or replacing “promote ratification” with “consider ratification.” We highlighted all the instances of watering down language and planned to ask the US delegation why they had suggested these changes. Representatives also suggested that we identify where the US delegates made suggestions which strengthen the document and to thank them for those efforts.

*Tuesday, 03/10/2009*

- Europe Caucus Meeting (Daniela Jauk)

About 30 women gather at the Europe Caucus meeting to work through the Agreed Conclusions which swell from 9 pages yesterday to 25 pages today with numerous edits by national delegates. It is moderated by Alexandra, a woman with Slavic accent representing the Europeans Women’s Lobby (EWL).<sup>1</sup> During the meeting representatives of the EWL, several representatives of The International Alliance for Women (TIAW) predominantly from France and Germany<sup>2</sup> were most vocal and visible. A good portion of the caucus is a vibrant info exchange about the new draft of Agreed Conclusions. The US “watered down” the language in recent days, the “Holy Sea” (Vatican) is very visible in the document and just added a paragraph on parental rights which one woman interprets as effect of the “fathers’ movement.” Iran added language that religious rights override women’s rights, Turkey introduced the word “harmful gender stereotypes,” the word equality was replaced with equity. A general urge to talk to the national delegates from the home countries is repeated.

When Alexandra introduces the campaign for a new Women’s/Gender Equality Architecture at the UN (GEAR), and proposes that EWL does the regional coordination for it, protests gets louder. The EWL represents only women from EU countries; more generally a lack of cooperation with other continents is criticized. “It is not a matter of ‘giving them,’” a woman from Israel says, “it is a matter of making them feel part of the Western region.” Eventually all participants (and it is a fluctuating number due to a coming and going) agree that EWL will do the regional coordination for GEAR. The main objective is to put together a shadow report on Beijing 15+ for the European region, whereas young women should be particularly highlighted (“young manifesto”). As for now it appears that the EU will support the institutionalization of GEAR. A blog address is shared to the group to keep updated on developments around these issues: <http://ngocswny.wordpress.com/>.

As last general theme the NGO forum for the 54<sup>th</sup> session of CSW next year comes up. It should be longer, and locations have to be found. There is too little information about costs and locations, but definitely it will and should be something bigger. Some women report that there is the idea to make a long women’s march around this time (and possibly marches in satellite cities) to enhance the visibility of NGO’s.

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1 The EWL claims to be the largest umbrella organizations of women’s associations in the European Union (EU). The EWL Secretariat is based in Brussels, but EWL has member organizations in 27 Member States of the EU and in 3 candidate countries.

2 The TIAW was founded 1980 and is a global umbrella organization that unites, supports and promotes professional women and their networks. Claim on website that they have currently over 40 Association Members located throughout the Americas, Europe and Asia, connecting over 50,000 women.

- NGO event (Sarah Swider)

I attended two NGO parallel events, one which focused on Caring for those affected by HIV and one which focused on gender and employment issues. The former event was informative and interesting. Most surprising was the role of religion in many of the NGOs represented in both the parallel events and in the meetings. However, in the parallel events the role of religion was explicit and discussed while it was more hidden in the official meetings. In this particular meeting, the role of religion was discussed in a constructive manner. NGO workers suggested while they are a “Christian organization” (in defending their work to a person who questioned them and their failure to recognize the role of God). However, they also pointed out that many missionaries tell HIV patients that God is their only salvation and then the patients refuse medicines which are keeping them alive. The discussions on the positive and negative role of these religious organizations were interesting. The second meeting I attended which dealt with employment issues was so terrible I left after about 15 minutes. Students also attended a number of events. They also met NGO representatives from around the world and conducted interviews with some of them. The visuals and interviews of the students will be collected on a DVD, it will be sent to SWS as soon as it is available.

- US UN Briefing

I walked away with three major impressions from the morning briefing with the United States delegates. First, under the new administration, the United States delegates are much more receptive to the United Nations and NGO participation and cooperative in the consensus building process. Second, in this spirit, the United States pushed for stronger language in two important areas; language on female genital cutting and language on trafficking of women. Finally, unfortunately, the United States still refused to support The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and actually worked to water down the language on measures relating to CEDAW.

The most powerfully impassioned statement I heard was made by Nasrine Gross on behalf of Kabultec, an Afghanistan NGO<sup>3</sup>. She implored the NGO representatives and the United States delegation to do everything possible for the passage of CEDAW suggesting that it not only provided a tool for women in the United States, but it was also an important tool for the United States to use in pushing for rights of women in Afghanistan.

- Strategy Meeting (evening)

NGO representatives gathered to assess their impacts on the US delegates and strategize the next day. During this meeting many participants again expressed their excitement and satisfaction with the impact of the new administration on US participation in the meetings. The group decided to target language regarding protections for “girls working as domestic workers,” and suggested to strengthen the language by adding a minimum age or language from the International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions number 138 and 182. Another important issue was that an informal past practice was violated. In the past, representatives could sit in the balcony and observe “closed sessions” which was seen as okay since the microphones were turned off. In the morning though, representatives were asked to leave. Discussion in the caucus concluded that if any one country delegate requested the removal of the representatives, it has to be carried out. However, some representatives were concerned that this is the result of the Bureau of the Commission being led and dominated by men. In the caucus it was decided that 1) the representatives would ask which country

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<sup>3</sup> Information material about the NGO can be mailed on request.

requested the removal of observers and 2) the concerns of violation of this past practice would be brought to the attention of the Bureau of the Commission. It was an important issue because it was an informal way to keep „watchful“ eyes on country delegates which seems to create a little pressure since someone felt the need to remove them.

During the meeting, a National Organization for Women (NOW) representative explained how CEDAW would have to be ratified by the US Senate and how important this was done “without reservations.” After the meeting she mentioned that they were working with Barbara Boxer to bring CEDAW under consideration by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee without reservations. **The US is the only industrialized country to date that has not ratified CEDAW.**

### **Other Highlights**

- A new Gender Architecture for the United Nations – The GEAR Campaign Petition can be signed here <http://gear.collectivex.com/link/go/46405896>  
Video explanation of the campaign <http://gear.collectivex.com/>
- Visited the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/>
- Some students attended at reception hosted by Judith Lerner and the Feminist Press at CUNY. The reception was in honor of Nasrine Gross (advocate of Afghan Women’s Rights). One student networked successfully, and will most likely do an internship at Feminist Press.

### **Recommendations/Ideas about Continued and Increased Participation:**

1. Continue to foster mentoring for younger representatives of SWS for UN meetings.
2. Suggestion that national SWS organization could be more active in supporting CEDAW as we did with the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009.
3. Have SWS delegates bring SWS literature (maybe a piece specifically designed for the UN) to the CSW. It could be a booklet which includes a list of relevant literature produced by members.
4. Link up SWS members with NGOs. This might require conducting a survey of SWS members to identify their areas of expertise and an additional webpage on the website. This list can then be put on the SWS website as a searchable database (make sure it includes geographical areas of expertise and languages in which work is written). The webpage should also include a database of NGOs, when they visit the website they can register and their organization and area will be added to the database. The searchable database could be advertised in the SWS literature for the NGO. The goal is the creation of a link between the NGOs and scholars.

5. SWS could financially support a member who is located in the global south in attending the UN meetings. She/he could meet prior with other delegates to discuss perspectives on the themes.
6. Since our strength is that we are academics, we could do more footwork early on, as suggested by Susan. We know the emerging theme this year is gender perspectives on the financial crisis. We could announce this to the list serve and request research and information related to the topic which we could then make available to the NGO's via the UN CSW website or in a statement submitted during the next meeting.

## **References**

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Gender Equality Architecture Reform Campaign, <http://gear.collectivex.com/>, 3/30/2009

International Alliance for Women (TIAW), <http://www.tiaw.org/>, 3/30/2009

UN Websites: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/index.html>, 3/31/2009

Parallel events:

[http://esango.un.org/event/csw\\_mission.html?page=calendarWeek&month=3&year=2009&week=2](http://esango.un.org/event/csw_mission.html?page=calendarWeek&month=3&year=2009&week=2), 3/31/2009