

## *Report on Commission of the Status of Women 61*

New York March 13 to 24 2017

*Report by DI Lockwood (SWP Federation Programme Director)*

This CSW was the greatest gathering of women's organisations since the Beijing Platform for Action and the United Nations buildings and their surrounds were a blaze of colour mixed with the formal suits of male employees and a true cacophony of languages. All this occurred against a background of bitter cold, snow caked streets and the noises of traffic and sirens that epitomise a giant city. Inside the United Nations, although there were disagreements about priorities and wording, the atmosphere was one of cooperation and a passionate desire to achieve the change that women have been striving for over decades.

State sponsored side event, round tables on issues, parallel events as well as the Consultation Day all provided opportunities to experience and understand the issues facing women around the world. It was not surprising to discover that these issues were the same in a broad range of countries although the progress made towards gender equity was somewhat dependent on the nature of government, its economic strength and its commitment to implementing the measures required by the United Nations.

From an Asia Pacific point of view, there were regional caucus meetings which enabled an exchange of views and information. Each day I attended also Australian government briefings lead by the Australian CSO delegates and supported each time by a member of the government delegation. These briefings gave us an account of progress in the negotiations about the Agreed Conclusions as each version was read and negotiated. This included notification about what countries wished to eliminate agreed language or were trying to insert language that could be considered "escape hatches". This information could be fed to Soroptimist International and in turn members of the various federations could feed this to "friendly" delegations. I also provided the Australia delegation with input from Soroptimist International as the SI International President's research person, volunteer Linda Witong had compiled data from all UN resolutions, Conventions and Covenant about wording previously agreed to by nations. Our presence is known. The Australian government hosted also an event where regional organisations were invited to share what they regarded as key issues so that Australia could take their concerns into account. These were valuable networking spaces and provided a chance to compare programmes.

Each day after the first began at around 8.30a.m. at the UN with a briefing from the NGO CSW groups which was attended by high level officials such as H.E. Ambassador Patriota, Chair of CSW, the head of UN Women and even the Secretary General himself who undertook to work to make the United Nations itself more gender equitable. Each of these addressed the audience and then took questions from the floor. It was reassuring to hear them extol the importance and value of civil society given that many more conservative nations are seeking to restrict CSO space and limit its involvement.

From a personal level, apart from attending also daily SI briefings at 9.30a.m. and attending an SI Advocacy Committee meeting, I focused on SI side and parallel events which were well attended and received and then attended regional side events which addressed the major theme of the economic empowerment of women and the world of work and those related to the emerging theme of indigenous women. The Australian government is taking the lead among its group on wording about this issue in the Agreed Conclusions and had two indigenous women as members of the CSO delegation.

I touched base during the day and at night with our scholarship winners whose individual reports will explore their experiences and their reactions to and learning from their attendance for separate weeks at CSW61. We all used Facebook and Twitter to share our experiences, including getting snowed out of the UN with the membership. Sonia Casanova even created a brief video to share with her club which was holding an IWD breakfast in Griffith. At the SI reception I had a two minute interview for public radio in mid America about our current Federation project and other South West Pacific work. Two minutes is a long time when you have little warning!

The first week closed with light snow falls, an opportunity to catch up on rest after 12 hour days which began at 6.00a.m. and a close personal encounter with ice. The second week is about negotiations around the Agreed Conclusion

The truly international nature of Soroptimism is evident at CSW as members from the four federations meet, support each other, share experiences and projects, renew friendships, establish new ones and realise that despite our differences in size and structure, that we all share a common purpose and passion. It is a little chilling, however, to realise that Soroptimist International is better known and recognised at the United Nations than it is in our own countries.

The second week has a greater focus on the negotiations although parallel events continue and I attended some as well as attending, for several hours, the Expert group on data. These events involve a panel of experts who present on an issue of the topic from different viewpoints before countries present on their progress and issues and NGOs can give an oral intervention. IDA Pat Black was given an opportunity to speak and gave a report and comments which were well structured and well received.

I attended a NZ sponsored meeting of the Pacific Island states and it was interesting to realise their priorities and some of the difficulties they face. Later I was able to notify the Australian delegation of their issues and indicate which of Australia's actions they were likely to support. I was able to hold similar discussions with the UK group and discuss issues we shared. One of the values of this meeting is the opportunity to network and identify like-minded organisations who might be interested in supporting our written statements.

As revised versions of the Agreed Conclusions became available, we spent time looking at language that needed strengthening or was suspect. Similarly, I could share SI work with the Australian Mission and point them to ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous Women. I worked

until after 9.00pm one night with a group on draft 2 and had the opportunity to work with the incoming IDA from SIA which was useful. During the week, I was able also to discuss issues about the President's Appeal with the chair, Sharon Fisher.

SISWP's credibility is enhanced by our attendance at CSW and many groups now recognise or acknowledge us. If we wish to be taken seriously and expand our contacts with governments this is an effective way to contribute to this. It is a way also of extending recognition of us in the Asia region and the Pacific islands.

Despite ongoing concerns that Agreed Conclusions would not be achieved this was done on Friday afternoon. We now must be alert to hold our respective governments to their commitments. This is a vital task for all civil society organisations.

There are lessons to be learned from our involvement:

- We need to establish alliances both for our advocacy work and our projects.
- We need to take seriously the role of NGOs, including us, to hold our respective governments accountable for their commitments at meetings such as this.
- We need to increase our advocacy efforts at all levels
- We need to ensure that clubs understand the importance of reporting projects
- We need to publicise the vital importance of our UN connections.

It will be interesting to see the reports of our two scholarship winners this year to assess the impact of the experience upon their understanding of Soroptimism.

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