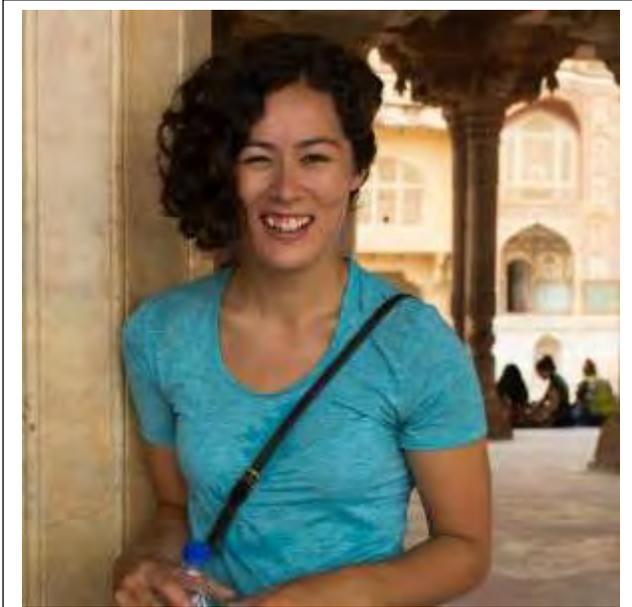# CSW Report: Cyberviolence and Empowerment

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I was trying not to fall asleep, and was failing miserably. My first day in New York was spent running to presentations in a sea of simultaneous presentations about the problems women and girls face around the world as well as the solutions that have been developed for facing those problems. Though the conference was lively and energetic, the city full of people; as hard as I tried, I was not as lively as I wanted to be due to jet lag. Then the speaker at the WFWP Luncheon, Patience Stephens, said, "Power and change must come from those on the platform reaching out to those who are not. We each have a responsibility, each and every one of us."

My ears perked up, my jet lag stifled for the moment. She was talking about the need for more experienced women to mentor other women, which is my kind of ball game.

To give some background, this was my first time attending the UN Women's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) at the UN Headquarters in New York. Quoting from their website, the CSW "promotes women's rights, documenting the reality of women's lives throughout the world, and shaping global standards on gender equality and the empowerment of women." The CSW is made up of NGOs that focus on improving the lives of women around the world. Every year the CSW meets to talk about the gaps and the successes that have brought women closer or further away from the policies set in the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

However, this was a landmark meeting because those policies that determine how close women and girls are to equality are being looked over and changed. This is the 20th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and, although the lives of women and girls have improved over this time, new problems have arisen as well.

A mentor had advised me to focus on a couple of topics at the CSW that interest me, and since there is limited space here, two of the topics that most interested me are cyber-violence and the role of men and boys in gender equality.

Cyber Violence Against Women

Recently, there was a huge scandal in which intimate celebrity photos were posted online without the consent of those involved. These photos were all of women. At the CSW, I attended a panel in which a range of people discussed issues with cyber violence against women. Cyber-violence is a huge issue right now. Never has there been such an ease of communication to post or send photos of an intimate partner and develop an online persona, which makes it easier to blackmail someone into doing what you want them to. More often than not, this type of thing happens to women and young girls.

In one case, an ex-husband created an online account under his ex-wife's name and posted their intimate pictures for all of her family and friends to see. In another case, a man blackmailed a teenage girl by saying that he would send their conversations to her family. In yet another case, a woman playing videogames online might receive sexually explicit and violent threats for playing a game. These three are different cases, but the main point of the panel was to encourage the creation of laws that make the internet a safe place for everyone instead of only one demographic of people. The panel encouraged the development of privacy laws to catch up with this new technology that we're still learning to handle.

Empowering Men and Boys

Sounds like a contradiction for the CSW, doesn't it? I also attended a panel about including men and boys in the conversation about gender equality. There was a time and, for some people, this still is a time where people feel, "Oh, this is a women's issue."

However, gender inequality isn't just about women and girls having access to education and receiving the same value as human beings, it is also about empowering men and boys to handle gender inequality and be a voice to support women. Every country (and culture) has its own slew of challenges to empower men and boys and I felt that the panel really demonstrated this.

The panelists were from a range of countries: the Netherlands, South Africa, and the Philippines and each dealt with this challenge in different ways. In South Africa, the panelist focused on rural villages and encouraging teenage boys who have a baby to take responsibility and help their significant other with getting up in the middle of the night or helping out with the cooking. In the Philippines, the government requires pre-marital counseling and relationship abuse is addressed as an issue.

The Netherlands, I felt, had the most relevance to our situation in the United States. One of the practices that worked was an implementation of mandatory training about the challenges women face. These trainings focus on the facts of women in the workplace, and sought to start a conversation so people are more actively aware and willing to discuss the problem. Personally, most of my challenges facing sexism come from a sub-conscious place. People don't actively try to be sexist, but it does happen and I was impressed by the ability to have a conversation instead of an argument about sexism.

Overall, the CSW was eye-opening and a fantastic place to learn more about the problems and the solutions that women around the world face. It was overwhelming, but exciting and I look forward to seeing what the future holds as women and men work together to empower humanity as a whole.