

What I Learned At the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

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April 15, 2019



The Beijing Platform for Action of 1995 set the first formal global goals for advancing women's rights. This platform covers 12 critical areas of concern: poverty, education and training, health, violence against women, armed conflict, economy, power and decision making, institutional mechanisms, human rights, media, environment, and the girl child. The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council established in 1946, brings together government, civil society, and the public to discuss how to transform the promises of the Platform for Action into concrete changes in individual countries. I was very fortunate to attend the 63rd CSW conference and the UN NGO reception. The theme of discussion this year was to ensure that social protection, public services, and sustainable infrastructure meet the needs of young people and advance gender equality.

I thought I would share a few things that changed my perceptions.

To eradicate poverty you must address gender equality

As an economics student, my understanding of the cause of poverty was the lack of jobs or training skills and poor infrastructure. I thought that if we tackle these issues, poverty will significantly decrease. What I was missing is that the biggest eradicator of poverty is in fact gender equality. At one of the UN general committee sessions, experts presented data analyzed by the World Bank which showed that females are far more predisposed to poverty at different ages than males and this is due to a range of factors, such as

having young children in the house, which forces them to leave the labor market, unpaid care work, or few maternity benefits.

Member states were called upon to enhance social protection systems in their countries by designing and operating these systems from a gender perspective. For example, they should provide a birth certificate to every girl child born, a requirement which will grant them access not only to vote but also to open a bank account and get a driver's license. Some of the other things were education grants, greater economic participation through skills training, programs for adolescent wellbeing and cash transfers.

Ownership of Land and Control of Assets for Indigenous People

One of the toughest things I had to learn while moving to a different country alone was advocating for myself. Advocating does not come easily and it is a process where you learn about your value and know when to speak up and defend yourself.

In a session on indigenous populations, a journalist from Nepal commented, "As water is needed for the survival of a fish, in the same way land is required for the survival of indigenous communities." There was a lot of discontentment in how lands are being exploited. Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities in Colombia continue to face violence from paramilitary and guerrilla groups fighting for control of territories. Human rights defenders from these communities are under increased threats and violence. Aggressive developments in Nepal such as road expansion, airports and fast track roads have caused people to be displaced from their ancestral homeland.

Agriculture is another important topic when it comes to land rights. Experts report that women in Africa contribute 70 percent of Africa's food production. They also account for nearly half of all farm labor in the world, and they ought to have rights to keep the profits derived from working on that land. To be empowered, women need access to property and economic development opportunities which too often they don't have.

Several representatives discussed measures to address the challenges faced by indigenous people such as pushing legislation, speaking truth to power, lobbying, teaching women how to be a strong spokesperson for the right to access land, and most importantly, states must talk with indigenous leaders and engage in grassroots dialogue in mother tongues to make meaningful contributions to promoting and protecting the rights of Afro-Colombian and Nepali indigenous minority groups.

The Town Hall Meeting

The town hall meeting provided an opportunity for women's civil society organizations to meet with United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres. What I enjoyed about this meeting was the Secretary General's attitude in telling people to not ask what the UN is doing for them and instead asking people to tell him what he should do for them. He said, "Power is not given, it is taken and we need to push back against the resistance as most people don't like it when power is being taken from them." He acknowledged that power is the cause of problems today in refugee camps or sexual harassment in workplaces.

Looking ahead

I am committed to making a contribution to my community around me and holding the WFP mission closer to my heart. It is important to share stories of struggle and strength, practice self-compassion and courage by showing up and engaging the world with joy. It is also so important to recognize that the United Nations would be nothing without the many NGOs who were present to step up and make the real difference.