Gender and Development Initiative

Gender and Development Conference Report

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The Gender and Development Initiative was launched in 2014 by faculty in the International Affairs Program and Department of Economics at Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA

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WILPF Practicum in Advocacy at the 61st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 61)
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I am a senior at Northeastern University majoring in International Affairs with minors in Business Administration, Global Social Entrepreneurship, and French. From March 12-17, 2017 I had the privilege to attend the 61st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City. As a college student I was able to attend the CSW as a student participant with the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) U.S. Section “Practicum in Advocacy”. This opportunity was provided to me through sponsorship by Professor Valentine M. Moghadam, Director of the International Affairs Program at Northeastern University.

Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)

WILPF is an international, non-governmental organization (NGO) with active sections working in 42 countries, an International Secretariat in Geneva and an office in New York focused on work with the United Nations.¹ The WILPF U.S. section is headquartered in Boston, with regional branches located in 26 states and the District of Columbia.² Founded in 1915, WILPF works through peaceful means to achieve world disarmament, full rights for women, racial and economic justice, and an end to all forms of violence. Core issue areas for WILPF U.S. include, advancing human rights, disarmament, immigration, and climate justice.

WILPF International did not formally participate in CSW 61 in order to call attention to the dozens of women from around the world who were not able to attend the Commission as a result of the recent U.S. travel ban. WILPF’s press release about the decision stated that the absence of these women from the CSW, “undermines the basic premise of the CSW as being an inclusive and participatory process and threatens its legitimacy.”³ By not formally participating, WILPF International did not send an official delegation to the CSW or host events as it normally does.

However, the Practicum in Advocacy of which I was a participant continued as normal as it was associated with only the U.S. section of the organization. Several U.S. WILFP members, including Prof. Moghadam, attended as well. Throughout my week at the CSW there were several reminders of the

¹ http://wilpf.org/
² http://www.wilpfus.org/
international women who were unable to attend, including the alteration of a session due to the inability of the presenters to enter the United States and empty chairs placed prominently at certain events to stress the gravity of the absence of these women.

**Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)**

Established in 1946, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is “the principal global intergovernmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women.” In 2011, four parts of the UN system merged to become UN Women, the body that oversees the CSW, among other functions.

The format of the CSW is an annual two week session which is attended by UN member states, UN bodies, and civil society organizations at the UN headquarters in New York City. Key discussion topics include, progress and gaps in implementation of core women’s rights agreements and resolutions, including the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 23rd special session of the General Assembly held in 2000 (Beijing+5), as well as the annual thematic issue related to gender equality and the empowerment of women. The 2017 theme of the CSW was “Women’s Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work”. By the end of the session, through discussion and negotiation, Member States finalize an outcomes document, known as the agreed conclusions, which, “contain an analysis of the priority theme and a set of concrete recommendations for governments, intergovernmental bodies and other institutions, civil society actors and other relevant stakeholders, to be implemented at the international, national, regional and local level.”

**Practicum in Advocacy**

The WILPF Practicum in Advocacy was facilitated by Dr. M.I. Torres and Dixie Hairston, two WILPF members who had previously attended the practicum as students. Daily programming consisted of a one-hour morning session and a two and a half hour nightly debrief session about experiences from the day. The group consisted of six college students from around the country, one student alumna from the previous year and three seasoned WILPF members who helped to provide context and background about WILPF.

4 [http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw#sthash.3yQrLSAt.dpuf](http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw#sthash.3yQrLSAt.dpuf)
5 [http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/outcomes#sthash.w0vIrvoH.IESVKHmR.dpuf](http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/outcomes#sthash.w0vIrvoH.IESVKHmR.dpuf)
During the day we were able to curate our own experience from a lengthy list of sessions put on by UN bodies, member states, and civil society organizations. We were provided with a temporary badge which granted us access to UN premises. Following the practicum, students are expected to complete a “take home” project which can consist of anything from a presentation about the experience to the creation of a new WILPF branch.

In our practicum sessions, in addition to debriefing, we also learned about a variety of topics related to advocacy. The topic that most interested me was the different ways in which civil society can influence the CSW agreed conclusions, including through lobbying country delegations and attending civil society briefings where high-ranking UN officials are present. We also discussed the differences and intersections between activism, advocacy and organizing.

**My Experience**

As an International Affairs major I was elated to be able to simply spend time at the UN headquarters, not to mention attend sessions featuring ambassadors and members of parliament from around the world. The experience contextualized the UN process and revealed both how accessible the lobbying process is for NGOs with consultative status to the UN and how difficult it is for Member States to negotiate a robust and meaningful outcomes document. Two of the most exciting moments from my experience at the UN were attending a civil society briefing presided over by the new UN Secretary-General António Guterres and attending the launch of the UN Women-ILO Global Equal Pay Platform of Champions which took place on the General Assembly floor and featured members of parliament from around the globe, U.S. retired soccer player Abby Wambach, and actress Patricia Arquette.

The CSW featured three types of events: *high-level events*, attended almost exclusively by UN member states, *side events*, hosted by UN Member states and/or UN bodies and attended by any CSW participant with badge access to the UN, and *parallel events* hosted by NGOs and civil society, off UN premises. Through the Practicum I received a temporary UN badge and thus was able to attend both side and parallel events. In total I attended seventeen sessions in addition to Consultation Day, a day of introduction and context-setting for civil society. I curated my schedule to attend events related to public-private partnerships, leveraging business and finance for women’s economic empowerment and the role and experience of young women in the changing world of work. I attempted to attend multiple sessions related to these topics based in different regional contexts.

**Takeaways and reflections**

*Women’s Economic Empowerment: Challenges in the Developing vs Developed Worlds*
The challenges faced by women in the developed versus the developing world related to economic empowerment are generally very diverse with some common themes. In general, the rhetoric around challenges to women’s economic empowerment from the US, Canada, and European perspective are related to career progression, the gender pay gap, and the role of companies in attracting and maintaining top female talent. Different strategies and solutions discussed were fair and flexible scheduling, mentoring programs, paid family leave for women and men, encouraging women to enter the STEM field, and investment in affordable childcare. These challenges related more to the architecture of a job and the role of the private sector.

The rhetoric around barriers to work in the developing world varied greatly by region and country and included: climate change, specifically drought, lack of adequate health services, education, rural development, agricultural investment, land rights, conflict and war, migration, and financial inclusion. A plethora of solutions were discussed on each of these unique and profound challenges. Overall, it was apparent that the barriers to work and women’s economic empowerment in the developing world are more complex and more related to the right to work and access to work as opposed to meaningful career progression.

Despite these vast differences, the CSW also highlighted global issues that nearly all women face, such as, uneven distribution of care work, lack of access to affordable child care, discrimination in the hiring process and workplace, and the gender pay gap. Further, in all of these conversations, it was noted that the economic empowerment of certain women often leads to the exploitation of low-income and migrant women in the form of low-paying or domestic work. Further, many of these barriers to work are intersectional and based within existing power structures. Finally, the most cited solutions to problems in both the developing and developed worlds were recognizing unpaid care work, investing in affordable child care services, and encouraging men to be caregivers.

Public-private partnerships, financial inclusion and social enterprise

There is a tremendous opportunity for women’s economic empowerment through public-private partnership and social entrepreneurship. According to Anastasia Thatcher Marceau, Manager of the Accenture Development Partnership, the private sector has much to offer in terms of expertise and skills for NGOs including “private sector pragmatism” and knowledge of in-demand skills, technology, and the changing digital landscape. The private sector also can provide much-needed financing to women’s economic empowerment-focused NGOs.

Financial inclusion is another important tool that can be leveraged for women’s economic empowerment. Financial inclusion refers to access to affordable, basic financial services such as opening
a bank account or applying for a loan, in addition to basic financial literacy. Lack of access to basic financial services disproportionately affects women and low-income communities. This puts women and low-wage workers at a further disadvantage as they cannot invest their money. One successful financial inclusion case study was presented on by the Peruvian Ambassador to the UN, Gustavo Meza-Cuadra. Peru’s “Modelo Peru” is based on a partnership between the government, telecom companies, financial institutions, and others who collaborated to create a digital banking system accessible on basic mobile phones. The program experienced fantastic results and the percentage of adults with a bank account in Peru increased from 29% in 2014 to 41% in 2016. This project enabled thousands of Peruvian women to save and send money, who were previously unable to do so. Modelo Peru is an innovative model of financial inclusion that also reveals the power of public-private partnerships.

Social enterprises are also critical to women’s economic empowerment. One social enterprise that presented at CSW was Days for Girls⁶, an organization dedicated to empowering girls to remain in school through access to affordable, reusable feminine hygiene products. Days for Girls uses a hybrid model: one part of the business is focused on setting up small social enterprises where women themselves create and distribute feminine hygiene products or sell pre-made kits and keep the premium they make from sales, while the other part of the business distributes pre-made kits to women and girls along with health education. Days for Girls is an example of an intervention that improves girls and women’s health, provides a small income generating activity, and promotes long-term success of girls by increasing school attendance. The CSW sessions I attended continually highlighted the necessity of the involvement of all sectors to maximize women’s economic empowerment.

**A Critical View**

**Gender Pay Gap, Technology**

The gender pay gap was a topic that was discussed frequently during the CSW. There was a common misconception that the gender pay gap is caused specifically by men and women being paid differently for completing an identical job. Although this phenomenon contributes to the gender pay gap, it does not account for its entirety. Some common solutions to the gender pay gap when viewed from this point of view are salary negotiation training for women and salary transparency policies for companies. While these solutions are crucial in closing the gender pay gap, other factors such as cultural norms and mindsets, occupational segregation, discrimination, and girl-child socialization away from STEM-related interests must be addressed when tackling the gender pay gap.

⁶ https://www.daysforgirls.org/dfg-our-approach
Something else I found that was missing from the CSW was a critical analysis of the changing world of work as it relates to technology. The transformative forces of artificial intelligence and automation are slated to dramatically change the world of work. This is a topic that is taking the business world by storm but was remarked upon very little at the CSW. If I attend the CSW in the future, I plan on using the advocacy skills I learned to show to others that the role of technology is relevant in the conversation around women’s rights.

Conclusion

Attending the CSW reaffirmed and informed my personal and career interests around business, social impact and women’s rights. The experience of being surrounded by thousands of professionals from around the globe working in all sectors to advance women’s rights was truly inspiring. Further, the WILPF Practicum in Advocacy helped me to process my learnings and provided me with invaluable advocacy skills. This opportunity was truly life-changing and I hope to be able to attend the CSW again in the future.