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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The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) took place in New York City from 13 to 24 March 2017. The two-week conference is hosted in an annual effort by The United Nations. The CSW held its first meeting at Lake Success, New York, in February 1947 with the participation of 15 women government representatives. The CSW sought to set global standards for women’s rights, change discriminatory legislation, and raise global awareness of women’s issues. Some of the commission’s earliest successes included halting the usage of ‘man’ to describe humanity. The commission also began to pioneer gendered research. Lapse in statistics made comprehensive legislation difficult to argue, so new studies highlighted specific, quantifiable issues faced by women. In 1972 the commission recommended that 1975 – the CSW’s 25th anniversary – be designated International Women’s Year. The years 1976-1985 would be declared *The UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace*. During this time new UN bodies designed to focus on women’s rights emerged, later playing a pivotal role in global women’s rights.1

The priority theme of CSW 2017 was ‘Women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work’. The review theme was ‘Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls’, and the emerging issue was ‘The empowerment of indigenous women’. Currently a fourth year Northeastern University student studying Political Science and International Affairs for my undergraduate degree, I am also enrolled in Security and Resilience Studies’ PlusOne program. At the suggestion of Professor Moghadam, whose course I took in Fall 2016, I attended CSW side events through funding from the International Affairs Program. My report will be of use to students and others interested in the work of the CSW. In addition, the report will support my working senior thesis, which aims to connect women’s security and resilience to subjects of economic empowerment, and sustainable development.

At the CSW, sessions were organized around the themes of sustainable development, climate change, new work, and economic empowerment. Each event host addressed the linkages between climate change, women’s employment, women’s rights, and sustainable development.

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1 For details, see [http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/brief-history](http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/brief-history)
The intersectional field of gender and sustainable development is relatively new yet booming with practically and interest, and involves economists, environmental scientists, political scientists, and sociologists. This area of study contains elements of world systems theory, political economy, development politics, and environmental development. The CSW addressed this complex niche area of study by inviting a diverse group of NGO’s to host side events. Representatives from WEDO, Heinrich Boell Stiftung NA, Mediators Beyond Borders, and the US Human Rights Network comprised only some of the incredible organizations present. Each NGO delivered specialized insight into the aforementioned areas of studied mentioned.

The CSW side events that I attended largely focused on women’s rights, climate change, employment/labor, and sustainable development. The subject of employment and labor held a prominent place in CSW discussions. Employment and labor can mean paid labor, unpaid labor, in the proper or care economy. Employment has different implications for women as a result of various global influences, but more changes will follow due to climate change and the ways we choose to cope with it. Speakers on climate change addressed the ways in which many governments are ignoring it, and how the impacts disproportionately impact rural, poor, women. Sustainable development requires that governments, communities, and businesses be environmentally conscious; we must have decent labor accessible to all, and we must acknowledge and protect human rights for all. Sustainable development requires a cooperative relationship between women’s rights, environmental issues, and employment/labor.

Women’s Rights

Women’s rights constituted the axis around which the conference revolves. Each side event neatly related its individual content to the continuous global struggle for women’s rights. One curious fissure of women’s rights is gendered budgets. A representative from Heinrich Boell Stiftung North America – a think tank affiliated with the German Green Party – delivered an interesting lecture on aspects of gendered budgets. Gendered budgets are funds thoughtfully applied in a way that is sensitive to gendered issues. These budgets can range from a national federal budget, to an NGO budget, or a large philanthropic donor budget. Heinrich Boell Stiftung (HBS) conducts research to highlight the disparities in general budgeting processes. A short anecdote was used to contextualize the necessity of gender budgeting:
A small village received funding for a community project that would provide opportunities for sustainable wealth. The project was described as gender equitable due to its communal nature. The project consisted of farming worms and selling the soil they enriched over time to local farmers. Both men and women were involved in the project and responsible for a different link in the production chain. Work was divided equally and therefore constituted as a responsible project. However, when the production roles were defined it was revealed that the jobs were ultimately unjust. Women were responsible for feeding the worms, tilling the soil, and maintaining worm habitats. This yielded no compensation. Men in the village were tasked with hauling the enriched soil to local markets for selling. There, they were able to retain all revenue generated from these transactions. Although this project was designed as a community stimulator, and men and women were participating in equal labor, men were responsible for the revenue-generating portion of the project.

This example serves as a digestible representative in dealing with general budgeting. Funds without careful consideration of women’s issues will trend towards the tides of sexism and oppression. As the HBS representative aptly pointed out, community projects are not equitable simply because women make up 50% of the community. When allocating a budget, we must consider the economic, political, and societal conditions that disproportionately impact women. Unless these issues are addressed during the budgeting process; funds, initiatives, and projects will continue to ignore women’s needs and exacerbate existing inequalities.

**Climate Change:**

Climate change in itself is an expansive subject riddled with contention as well as a sense of urgency. Aside from the usual climate change debate, at the CSW speakers contextualized climate change in terms of women’s issues, labor, conflict, and sustainable development. Speakers from the Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) lectured on the void in research on climate changes and women. We know that climate change has a disproportionate impact on the rural and poor, but what about women? WEDO asserts that the most prominent repercussions of climate change have been identified as instances that impact women more than men. Specifically, they pointed to food and water insecurity, the increase in occurrence and velocity of extreme weather events, migration, conflict, and disease. Women in many parts of the world are responsible for fetching water; this task is strenuous and prevents women from participating in revenue-generating activities. If climate change leads to water
insecurity, women will be forced to travel farther for water thus contributing to their lack of participation in the formal economy. In order to formally quantify the impacts of climate change on women, research must be gender specific. As stressed by representatives of WEDO, the research presented at the Paris Accords 2015 was not gender-specific, and thus pending policies are negligent of women’s issues.

Climate change is a catalyst that will continue to deteriorate the status of women across the globe. This pertains especially to poor, rural women in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries. What are some remedies for this? WEDO presented three key ideas. Firstly, there must be a formal developed intersectional space where the feminist movement and environmental moment can interact. Many other movements through history have gained traction and success by partnering with likeminded groups. Next, within this intersection there should be a special emphasis on diversity. Young feminists should be engaged, because of their hyper-awareness of intersectional feminism. In applying this practice, we should see increased engagement by people of color, the LGBTQI community, diverse ethnicities, and indigenous populations. Diverse engagement will help spread the movement as well as address concerns by vulnerable, sometimes ignored, communities. Thirdly, we need to ensure more women are present at multilateral climate discussions. In 2015 just 35% of delegates present at climate sensitive conversations were women, despite the fact that the effects of climate change disproportionately impact women. WEDO believes that by addressing these three ideas along with producing gender considerate research, we can make major strides towards sustainability and for women’s rights.

**Employment/Labor**

The main theme of the 61st Commission of the Status of Women was employment and labor in the changing world. Various NGOs addressed this in relation to their organization’s mission statement. The International Network for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ESCR) shared the most impactful lecture on labor and employment in a changing world. ESCR seeks to build a global movement of human rights and social justice by partnering with over 280 NGOs, advocates, and social leaders. During their presentation they addressed labor standards, decent wages, and cyclical economic oppression.

In a capitalistic world like ours, core countries import labor in order to circumvent their own developed labor standards; in so doing, we perpetuate labor exploitation. Although we want
to pay the lowest price for goods, we don’t want to pay with our own human suffering. At the commission, a Filipina named Arlyn shared her story of working in a plastic-producing factory. She works seven days a week, twelve hours a day, with only one hour’s break. At the end of the week she takes home $14. Arlyn one day asked her supervisor why they made such little money despite the enormous amount of product they make each day? Her supervisor responded by firing her.

How can we respond to the changing tides of labor in the developing world? ESCR suggests: unionize. Not just any unionization, but female-led unions. Representatives from ESCR encourage female-driven unionization because women are overrepresented among exploited laborers. ESCR suggests women should lead unions, maintain a comprehensive list of demands, and focus less on the minimums and more on the maximums. Union leaders should include fair salaries, increased access to education, and employer sponsored benefits. Access to these elements will halt the cyclical nature of exploitation. Access to education and healthcare can improve one’s ability to obtain and maintain decent work, thus procuring a more substantial and steady income. Furthermore rather than rallying for a higher minimum wage, unionizers should fight to raise the poverty line. Many governments disguise impoverished people by setting living standards so low. This allows a county to report a low poverty rate whilst people living above the poverty line are suffering greatly.

Another issue to be addressed, according to the ESCR, is the recognition of domestic workers. Women have long struggled to qualify the work they do in the home. This is known to many as the ‘care economy’ or ‘pink economy’. These types of labor prevent women from participating in the formal economy, thus precluding them from accessing government-sponsored benefits. This most deeply affects women who work for other families, doing work in ‘the’ home even if it is not necessarily her home. Being a maid, caregiver, or nanny disqualifies a woman from receiving sick leave, unemployment benefits, or labor rights. A factory worker can sue an employer for wrongful termination but a domestic worker cannot. Formal recognition of domestic workers by the state will make these women visible again. Having access to laborers benefits creates a safety net that will prevent women from falling into the depths of poverty and worker abuse. ESCR identifies this issue as a critical step towards women’s equality in the labor force.
Sustainable Development

The subjects of women’s rights, climate change, and employment/labor each held a prominent place at the CSW 2017. Each focus relates to the other in intimate, complicated ways. One way to link each topic is sustainable development. We cannot be sustainable if we are not gender equitable, climate conscious, and labor friendly. Gender equity is more than the general empowerment of women. Gender equality has positive benefits for the economy, innovation, and violence. A sustainable economy is one where both sexes participate in good working conditions.

Moreover, climate change absolutely must be addressed in order to achieve true sustainable development. Relying on non-renewable resources is a temporary operation style. The world literally cannot continue relying on non-renewable materials and fuels or we will run out. Aside from the fleeting existence of our resources, the ramifications of our production methods are changing atmospheric integrity rapidly. Meaning, it is a toss-up as to whether we will first run out of fuel or the Earth will become uninhabitable. We must take significant action to make our production methods more responsible in order to continue existing as a planet.

Lastly, employment and labor standards are crucial for sustainable development. Exploiting developing countries for labor and resources is a temporary game. In order for humanity to develop each individual person must have the capacity and opportunity to be health, be educated, and be safe. Current labor standards create opportunities for manufacturers to pray on impoverished populations. This exploitation prevents people from receiving fair wages, decent work, health benefits, and education.

Multilateral cooperation, non-governmental organizations, and multinational coalitions are key to addressing these needs. The path to sustainable development is long, complicated, and fraught with obstacles. The process will be multi-generational and multilateral. But that should not thwart our continuous efforts for a better world. As one event speaker said “I am a link in the chain, and the link in the chain will not break here”.