TWENTY FIRST CENTURY WOMAN

Reflections from the 63rd United Nations Commission of the Status of Women (CSW63)

Helena Qian

Background

“Women’s rights are human rights and human rights are women’s rights.”
– Hillary Clinton, UN Fourth World Conference for Women (Beijing, 1995)

On June 21st, 1946, ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council) established CSW (Commission on the Status of Women), the ‘principal global intergovernmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women’. This involved documenting the reality of being a woman around the world and shaping global standards. The role was further expanded in 1996 to monitor and review progress pertaining to the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was a landmark agreement adopted by all 189 countries at the time (including Australia) as the defining framework with which to ‘advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity.’ Of note, 2020 marks 25 years since the Beijing Declaration and will be the core theme of CSW next year.

Whilst the Beijing Declaration is non-binding, CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) is a binding treaty which Australia signed in 1983. By doing so, the Australian government has committed to take ‘all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men.’ The CEDAW Committee regularly reviews each member state’s adherence and commitment to the treaty with Australia being praised for delivering our first Paid Parental Leave Scheme and positive developments but also criticized about the gender pay gap, violence against women and the disproportionate impact on the indigenous population.

Consequently, each year for 2 weeks in March, member states, UN entities, multi-nationals, NGOs, civil society and multi-stakeholder groups convene at the UN Headquarters in New York to discuss priority themes, share experiences and deliberate strategies to further advance progress and address setbacks. The priority theme for CSW63 this year was social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.
The F Word

“Feminism isn’t about making women stronger, women are already strong, it’s about changing the way the world perceives that strength.” – G.D. Anderson

Before delving into my CSW63 experience, there is one word that simultaneously unites, divides and embodies a concept I felt necessary to reconcile with before attending CSW63.

Feminism.

From the French word, feminism, it was first used by French socialist Charles Fourier to describe the emancipation of women in 1837. Some definitions of the word feminism found online include:

“the advocacy of women’s rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes”[4]

“the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes”[5]

“world-wide revolt against all artificial barriers which laws and customs interpose between women and human freedom. It is born of the instinct within every natural woman’s soul that God designed her as the equal, the co-worker, the comrade of the men of her family, and not as their slave, or servant, or dependent, or plaything.”[6]

“movement that seeks superior rights and privileges for women while hiding under the guise of equality”[7]

“a bastardized corruption of the world favouritism”[7]

The stark contrast between these definitions encapsulates the polarising nature of feminism and its varying interpretations. However, if we navigate through history from a Western perspective, the first wave of feminism centred around the suffragette movement which sought voting rights for women, the second wave centred on sexual and reproductive rights including economic parity and the third wave - the current wave - has challenged the gender binary and existing social paradigms surrounding gender roles and intersectionality.

However, at the core, one value resonates within all these waves. Feminism, as I define it, is simply about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. How this manifests is dependent on personal values and kept fluid by the emergence of new ideologies and critical analysis of old doctrines. One key distinction that I only came to appreciate this year, is that being equal does not mean being the same. We are not all the same, but equal in value.

Thus, I am a feminist.

Invest in women, invest in peace, invest in economic stability

As part of the Young Feminist Caucus’ photo campaign this year, I was asked to self-reflect on why feminism matters to me.

Equality. Dignity. Respect. Universal Emancipation. Generalising humanity down to gender differentiation and expectations is a restrictive paradigm that prevents us from maximising our full potential. In this age of self-awareness and collective movement towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we should be recognising our individual strengths, not the pre-defined box people may want to place us in.

The Experience

“Justice for women is first and foremost a human right and critical for progress across all the SDGs. It’s not just the right thing to do, it’s the best thing to do.” – Jeni Klugman, Georgetown Institute for Women, Harvard Kennedy School

I was privileged to attend CSW63 as part of the IFMSA (International Federation of Medical Students’ Association) delegation. We were a group of 8 medical students from different countries around the world but all passionate about gender equality and the empowerment of women.

The commission itself is structured in a way whereby numerous sessions run concurrently on-site at UN HQ and offsite. At one time, there could be as
many as a dozen events going on, hence, it was imperative for us to thoroughly analyse the side events beforehand and create our ideal timetable for the fortnight. Events start as early as 7 am and as late as 7 pm. For us, we made the effort of attending as many events as possible that were relevant to youth and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Conversely, many veteran attendees selectively chose to attend around 1-3 events per day. Some events required invitations or early RSVP due to venue capacity so teamwork and continual communication was vital. Regardless, the rooms filled to capacity quickly after day 3 and we realised we’d been much too optimistic thinking we could attend side events in differing locations consecutively without factoring in at least 30 minutes in between.

Nearly all the sessions onsite at UN HQ involved a panel with distinguished guests from various sectors that were brought together to discuss a particular theme with the opportunity for questions at the end. In all honesty, many of the member state speakers merely read statements highlighting the positive work their government had done for gender equality without contributing meaningful insight and dialogue. Hence, it became important to note who was hosting the event and stalking the profiles of the speakers. It was particularly compelling, albeit confronting, attending side events hosted by organisations with fundamentally different views to mine (i.e. on the topic of abortion). Offsite, there was a lot of variability, ranging from interactive workshops to social gatherings involving canapes, live music and a bar tab!

It was a surreal experience having direct access to world leaders and fascinating hearing the successes and failures of gender equality around the world. Above all, I was grateful to have the opportunity to converse with a multitude of interesting characters I would have otherwise not met. For example, when conversing with women in the military at CSW63, it was intriguing to hear of their revelation that they initially made unconscious choices to emulate conventionally male characteristics such as wearing suits, having short hair and no makeup. Through mentorship and self-reflection, they’ve continued to be leaders in their field whilst maintaining their expression of femininity and reinforcing the sentiment that you do not need to behave more like a man to lead in a male-dominated industry—being equal and being the same are not congruent, a key revelation I alluded to earlier.

The Highlights:

“I want you to remember 2 numbers today, the first is a threat: 18 million shortage of health workers and the second is a hope: 1.8 billion young people around the world...women make up 70% of the health workforce, but hold the majority of unpaid and under-valued positions. Why is women’s leadership seen as such a threat?” – Batool Wahdani

During the Opening Ceremony, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres exclaimed: “I am a proud feminist”. In addition, the point he emphasised most heavily was to “push back against the pushbacks – because people do not like to see power being taken” which became the buzz phrase of the Commission.

Whilst waiting for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the Townhall Meeting of Civil Society, UN CSW63 member states, in an impromptu fash-
ion, started performing traditional songs and dance before breaking out in unison and singing together.

Meeting Hon Dr Sharman Stone, the Australian Ambassador for Women and Girls who has been an inspirational advocate for gender equality and championed the elimination of FGM, child marriages, human trafficking, poverty and disease in the Asia Pacific region. She is also responsible for spearheading the national strategy to eliminate Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders and has expressed interest in working closer with AMSA Global Health to facilitate increased engagement with the Asia Pacific.

At the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Women and Sport Awards, my own unconscious bias was challenged as I reflected on the disparity in recognition, media coverage and pay between men and women in sports. If asked, I could rattle off at least half a dozen male soccer players but would struggle with naming even one female soccer player. We had the pleasure of meeting Marta Vieira da Silva, 6 time FIFA World Player of the Year - Olympian -Inspiration. She moved me to tears as she delivered a personal account on the power of sport to change lives for the better.

“Prejudice and lack of opportunities hurt me many times along the way. It hurt me when the boys did not let me play, it hurt when adult coaches from opposing teams took me out of championships, because I was a girl, it hurt to leave my family at the age of 14 to face a 3-day bus trip with little money in the pocket and go live alone in Rio de Janeiro to play professional football. But my certainty of where I wanted to go never let me give up”

Attending the Australian Commission’s side event on Sexual Harassment in the Workforce with the keynote by Hon Kelly O Dwyer, the Minister for Women. This was also an opportunity to meet the Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins whom spearheaded the National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities report and is now leading the first National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian workplaces. These leading ladies epitomize the mantra that change does not take time, it takes action.

Supporting IFMSA’s (International Federation of Medical Students’ Association) event with Ipas where one of our own, Egle, was on the panel. The core message surrounded the simple statement that abortion is health-care.

How do we teach moral values? As children, we often learn about the outside world through stories before we even step foot in the classroom. From stories, we teach the future generation about love, distinguishing kindness from malice, recognizing justice from injustice and encouraging moral integrity. This inspired UN Women Georgia to compile 21 fairy tales inspired by real female figures from Georgian history into a book, “Once There Was a Girl”. A wonderful initiative for a wonderful cause.

The Permanent Mission of Germany hosted a viewing of “Digital Warriors” and panel discussion with the film subjects themselves and Karlie Kloss afterwards, highly recommend watching the documentary!

Learning about the complex interplay between economics and the disproportionate impact of taxes on women. An OECD analyst estimated that gender inequality cost the worldwide economy 14 billion dollars each year, meaning that only an inclusive society can reach economic stability. The most enlightening quote from these sessions: “Livelihood projects and micro-entrepreneurship are reducing gender based violence because they elevate the status of women. But micro will remain micro unless we interweave macro which is about the economic rights of women to own land, be employed and so forth”. In addition, UNFPA hosted a fascinating session on the status of women in post conflict areas, where they noted an interesting increase in political leadership, the effects of which did not translate to women-centred care despite research indicating that women tend to spend more economic reserve on family and social needs and hence, disproportionately contribute to post-conflict social recovery. Thus, women should be a key beneficiary group in post-conflict employment programs. In saying so, we often talk about the right to work but we mustn’t forget about the disproportional unpaid care work many women undertake.

All the interesting conversations and fascinating people who congregate for CSW63. A truly won-
derful experience, compounded by the incredible delegation I had the privilege of attending with.

The Takeaways

“Privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it’s not a problem to you personally.”

CSW63 is a rich opportunity for information exchange and cross-collaboration, although the productive dialogue and innovation typically happen in between sessions. Networking is the key advantage of attending in person. This provided the opportunity to engage with the people around you. Conversations which left the deepest impression on me were often had whilst waiting for coffee or resting between sessions in East Lounge.

Adequate pre-departure training and research is essential for making the most out of CSW63 and being able to meaningfully engage with speakers and delegates.

No matter how well informed you think you are about your passion, there is always much to learn and unconscious bias you hold. Do not view these as self-inadequacies, but rather, a continual opportunity to do better.

Universal healthcare is a fundamental right encompassing 3 key aspects:

a. Full healthcare coverage to the entire community, including social protection systems for vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. “Half the world’s population still lack access to essential health services...in countries that have dropped their MMR, the rate in their indigenous population is actually increasing so we should not be talking about UHC with a broad stroke” – Amy Boldosser-Boesch.

b. The Adequate extent of healthcare coverage to ensure access to essential services.

c. Affordability and financial protection for users of healthcare services. It was sobering to learn that 1 in 7 people worldwide went into debt due to catastrophic health spending meaning they likely had no other choice but die.

Invest in women, invest in peace, invest in economic stability.

Do not instrumentalise faith leaders during periods of devastation and unrest, include them throughout.

Let girls be girls and not brides. “Girls don’t just choose to drop out of school, they drop out due to patriarchy, due to poverty, due to inequality” – UNGEI

Embrace both female and male champions of gender equality as it is naïve for us to think we can do it on our own. “Why do we only accept what’s given? If there’s one spot for a woman in leadership, then women will fight one another for it. But why don’t we work together to demand 4 spots for women instead?” – Katja Iversen, CEO Women Deliver

At times, I often feel frustrated and overwhelmed when I read of the atrocities faced by women my age at this very moment in time. Many harrowing experiences were shared over the fortnight, but as the familiar feeling of my heart breaking for the victims engulfed me, this was extinguished with tales for survival, courage and determination. The high attendance and coverage of CSW63 is a testament to the importance of gender equality, the legacy of past champions and the collective efforts of everyday people to leave no one behind.

“Alone we are strong, together we are stronger. Justice for women is justice for everyone.”

Helena Qian is a University of Newcastle student and current Chair of AMSA Global Health with a penchant for travel, passion for effective altruism and love for youth empowerment.

Conflict of Interest
None declared

Correspondence
helena.qian@amsa.org.au

References
2. UN. Fourth World Conference on Women Beijing Declaration. [Internet]. New York: UN. [updated 1995; cited 2019]
April 25th]. Available at <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>


