

Report on the Commission on the Status of Women (2004)

By Sharmin Ahmad

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), a vital addition to the United Nations session for the advancement of women was founded in 1946 through a collective effort and advocacy of the Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) community. The forty-eighth session of the CSW held in the United Nations in March 2004 was a continuation of the sustained endeavor to empower disadvantaged women in all spheres of life. The session unfolded around two critical issues under consideration by the Commission:(1) the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality (2) women's equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution and in-post-conflict peace building.

The CSW conference was divided into two main segments, (1) The Commission session which was represented by the government delegates and (2) The Side Events, in the form of workshops and trainings organized and facilitated by the NGOs. The thematic caucus and the linkage caucus were formed to facilitate networking among diverse groups. NGO representatives, representing a number of organizations or caucus were given preferences to participate and speak during the panel discussions on the thematic issues of the session.

The European delegates in general highlighted their achievements in reducing disparity between gender roles by helping men to devote more time in unpaid activities such as child care and domestic responsibilities which were traditionally carried out by women. The minister for Labor in Finland mentioned about the Child Care Leave Act which is also extended to fathers as a way to promote shared participation in child rearing and allowing women, if they choose to do so, to contribute to work outside, without having to feel guilty.

The French delegate emphasized the responsibility of the media in promoting non-sexist messages in its advertisement and projecting women with dignity.

Sweden, which is ahead of all nations in its implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security, presented an impressive account of women's status in Sweden. Minister for Gender Equality mentioned the significance of statistics in measuring success. To ensure women's progress in socio-economic and political spheres, the government of Sweden publishes a booklet every two years to report success, failure and ways to improve. "The government must dare to show reality", she concluded.

Ireland and Norway similar to Sweden have Gender Equality departments built in respectively within the Ministry of Justice and local Municipality and funded by the states' budget in mainstreaming gender equality.

In the United Kingdom the Ministry of Finance has an additional responsibility to produce data and statistics for all other Ministries on gender based pay gaps, domestic violence, health, education etc. to reduce disparity. Girls overall do better in all levels of education than boys in U.K.

The delegates from the developing nations pointed out the lack of resources being the primary reason that negatively impact research on women. The delegate from Namibia urged the Western nations to charge less for consultancy in helping to carry out research in developing nations. The member of Women's Council and advisor to the Prime Minister in Armenia held social stereotyping to be another hindrance in collecting accurate statistics on women's status. The lack of accurate statistics, lead to false reports and jeopardize success. She recommended establishing a hotline to promote conflict resolution and achieving gender balance.

While poverty, lack of access to credit, domestic violence and meager reproductive health were the shared concerns among the developing nations, some concerns with regard to women's well being were area specific. The South and South East Asian delegates expressed their concerns about high level of sex trafficking of women and girls across the borders. The African delegates called for special attention in AIDS prevention. In Botswana, for example, the girls between fifteen and nineteen years have HIV virus prevalent among them. The Israeli aggression in the occupied territories, according to the Palestinian delegate's report, have adversely affected the conditions of Palestinian women, while the restriction on polygamy in Morocco was construed an achievement in strengthening women's status. The Israeli representative Eli Ben Tura accused the UN of not mentioning suicide bombing by the Palestinians of the Israeli civilians, while mentioning the plight of Palestinian women and children in its document. The Palestinian delegate responded that although violence should never be condoned, the unjust occupation by Israel must end to stop recurring violence and unrest in the region.

Women from around the world celebrated the International Women's Day formally recognized by the UN, on March 8. In observance of this special day, a stand for Peace against the proliferation of war and foreign intervention that serves selfish external interests and affect women disproportionately was sponsored and organized by the Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice, in front of the UN building.

Indoor, the UN focused on AID prevention in observance of the International Women's day. Queen Noor of Jordan was a special guest of the session and seated among the panelists.

In keeping with the UN millennium goals to reduce maternal mortality by two thirds and ensure environmental sustainability the Secretary-General Kofi Annan stressed on the reduction of HIV, which affects women world wide at an epidemic

rate. Women are most affected by AIDS, not because they are more promiscuous than men, but men have many partners, compounded by social stigma and lack of support from male members of the family, prevent women in seeking help. AIDS is also directly related to poverty. A study in India showed that when women own properties, they are less likely to be abused and contract HIV viruses causing AIDS. A Global Collision of Women to combat AIDS was launched by the UN and expanded many programs in AID prevention.

Angela King, special advisor to the Secretary-General, who also contributed specially to AIDS prevention, listed Female Genital Mutilation, honor killing, domestic violence and traditional stereotypes which make women vulnerable to AIDS and gender inequality. The third speaker (name?) reported on the Middle East where strong family and sexual restrictions may prevent AIDS but those are also reasons for taboos in AIDS diagnosis and it's treatment. Among the Middle Eastern nations the Sexual Hotline established in Egypt, and AIDS prevention methods in Lebanon and Iran have yielded positive and groundbreaking results. "AIDS is a Human Rights and Women's Rights issue," the speaker concluded. Noerine Kaleeba, a fifty-two year old woman from Uganda and founder of an organization on AIDS prevention lost her husband due to AIDS seventeen years ago when AIDS was not a concern for the international community. Through a telling personal narrative she shared with the audience an untold suffering of her children, husband and herself by her community due to the stigma associated with AIDS. Undaunted, she began to mobilize the AIDS victims and their families. Trained as a physical therapist, she went to hospitals where AIDS patients were left out and founded a support group of AIDS victims. Through this group she gave a voice to the victims of AIDS and their families. She raised funds to provide education, especially among girls to remain in school and teach them AIDS prevention. She also arranged sponsors to treat women with AIDS and promoted those programs to access treatments. The slogan and motto of her organization defines her goal, "Living positively and dying with dignity". Today, Uganda reversed itself from the AIDS epidemic due to the massive awareness among people and dedicated leadership of women like Noerine Kaleeba.

Aside attending the daily sessions I participated in the draft committee comprised of Australian NGOs in adding and replacing some agreed words on participation of women in post-conflict electoral processes. For example I added "safety" for women voters, electorates and monitors in promoting women's participation in political decision-making.

In the regional caucus I worked with several groups to work on the conflict prevention and peace processes sections of the draft. U.S.A opposed mentioning all forms of violence prevention against women on the ground that U.S women combatants, because of the nature of their work, will suffer violence.

My colleague Maryam Funches of the Islamic American Zakat Foundation and I were part of the NGO Caucus which was represented by women from various parts of the world including Canada, Norway, England, New Zealand and Japan. As part of the Caucus we worked on to make a [statement on the thematic issue of mainstreaming women's equal participation in Conflict Prevention: Management and Conflict Resolution: and in Post-Conflict Peace Building](#). Our common concerns against the proliferation of war and violence worldwide that threaten the basic frameworks of human rights and peace were reflected and a call to redirect resources wasted on armaments and conflicts “to the provision of basic security needs” and the implementation of UN agenda to promote “women’s equal participation and representation at the highest levels of decision making” were duly stated. The inclusion of the role of “mass media” in promoting violence that I suggested were deleted several times from the original draft by the UN-NGO coordinating committee and was added to the final draft following a strong stand of the caucus in favor of it’s addition. The statement was published in The World of Women, an NGO newsletter of the CSW read during the session, and was circulated among all the delegates.

I joined a training workshop on armed conflict prevention organized by a Washington based women’s NGO. More information about this group can be found by visiting www.womenwarpeace.org. The workshop defined an effective conflict prevention that looks at the sources of conflict and not just resurgences. It noted that if nonviolent conflict is suppressed it will lead to a violent conflict. Iraq was used as an example to understand an intractable nature of conflict in which people had lost trust and negotiations broke down. The U.S proposal (while it helped in drafting the Iraqi constitution) that would have transferred Iraqi assets to be controlled by foreign entrepreneurs fell apart as a result of such lack of trust of the U.S. There is a correlation between violence and finance that can be disrupted by boycotting those corporations that fund armed conflict and thrive in violence. When asked if there are significant women peacemakers known? I referred to Ingrid Betancourt, senator and presidential candidate of Columbia, who waged a nonviolent war against the drug lords and has been kidnapped by them and Rachel Corrie who was murdered by the Israeli military in her peaceful protest against the demolition of Palestinian homes. We hear neither outcry in the mass media against their perpetrators nor any mention of their heroic deeds.

Women’s National Commission in U.K organized a mock trial of the Security Council resolution 1325 intended to ensure women’s rights, peace and security. Women from Columbia, Iraq and Nepal were among the witnesses to report on 1325. The mock trial triggered laughter in the audience and provided a stark reality of 1325. The witnesses proclaimed that resolution 1325 is poorly implemented. In reality it’s considered a soft issue and neglected. When other resolutions are debated, 1325 is not addressed in the men-run shows. There still is a significant disparity between the resolution and its implementation. Recommendations were made for the civil society to demand a monitoring system

to implement 1325, to incorporate it with all bodies of the UN and to train men and boys to work as partners for peace and security.

Zainab Al-Suwaij, co-founder of Iraqi women's Higher Council was applauded when she mentioned her group's position against the incorporation of Shariah law to govern Iraq and her group's success in defeating the proposed legislation. Zainab who wears headscarf and hails from a family of Shia religious scholars was the only Iraqi woman on street during the uprising against Saddam Hussain in 1991. An NGO representative from Kuwait, expressed her concern to me, over Zainab's comment on Women's victory in defeating the proposed Shariah law. "Better way should have been," she said, "to inform about various groups comprising Shia, Sunni, Zeidi, and so forth who espouse different religious schools of thoughts in interpreting the Shariah and which makes it difficult to implement a fair policy." "Then", she continued, "people would have been aware that not Islam but different interpretations make it difficult to implement the Shariah in a balanced way."

Hadil, from Egypt was disappointed over the response another Middle Eastern woman made to her Western NGO counterpart as to why she wears headscarf (hijab). She wears headscarf, she said, to protect herself from rape!! The issue of rape and sexual violence is far too complex to assume that a headscarf is the solution to such aggression.

In Bangladesh in 1971, more than hundred thousand Muslim women were violated by the invading Pakistani military who identified themselves as Muslims, in Bosnia-Herzegovina Muslim women were violated by the so called Christian Serbs and in the Indian state of Gujrat, hundreds of Muslim women were violated in the hands of the Hindu right wing groups who were also associated in the killing of Gandhi, who himself was a Hindu and connected himself to greater humanity through his service.

National Council for Research on women co-sponsored an event to make a feminist analysis of the targeted sexual violence against women in Gujrat and to find ways to end sexual exploitation and violence in conflict situation. The panelists in the session arrived at a consensus that sexual violence is part of the patriarchal culture based on ruthless competition to gain control. In order to combat exploitation and violence against women, human rights groups must closely work together. Ruchira Gupta, an Indian reporter of Hindu background who was beaten and gang raped by the Hindu fundamentalists when she reported on the Gujrat pogrom, joined a coalition and founded an organization to raise awareness against sexual violence, and spoke on coalition building to protect fundamental human rights.

Personal stories are powerful motivators in social transformation. As Lily Thapa from Nepal finished her presentation about her work to support widows, I approached her to gain further insight into her work. Curious, I asked this mild

mannered young woman about her motivation to work for widows. Her answer unfolded in to an inspirational story of faith, courage, sacrifice and success. Lily Thapa was married at sixteen, mother at eighteen and became a widow barely at the age of twenty-seven when her husband, who was working as a physician in the UN peace keeping mission in Iraq in 1996, was killed by a bomb blast that fell over the UN building. Lily, who was treated like a queen in the traditional family and community environment, because of her husband's position, fell from status. With three minor children, and deprived of emotional and financial support Lily faced a crucial reality. The UN denied her any compensation on the ground that her husband was off duty, meaning that he had just handed over the duty to his co-worker before returning home after nine long months of absence from his family. He was killed the next day. With the help of her expertise as a lawyer, Lily began to fight for her right. She filed a case in the UN. Mary Robinson, who was the chairperson of the Human Rights Commission, granted her an interview after six months of waiting. Lily felt that Mary Robinson, being a woman herself, understood her plight on a personal level and granted her compensation without further delay. Lily won her case, which also helped expand the UN responsibility for the peace keepers until the time they reach from their UN assignment. A firm believer in God, she did not end her fight after winning her case. She felt that God wanted to help other widows through her. She understood their plight because she is one of them. In a traditional male chauvinistic society, where widows and single women have no status and many are abused physically and sexually, her organization, Widows for Human Rights, has rendered hope and dignity for them. When I asked her why she did not remarry. She answered, "Because of my children and for their well being".

Among other issues there has been a growing concern over the roles of the World Bank and IMF in their dictatorship of the world economy, exploitation of the South by the Western multinational corporations, colonization of agriculture in the name of globalization, U.S. imperialism and escalated fundamentalism that particularly affect women and children worldwide.

A member of a Canadian NGO, Voice of Women for Peace suggested putting a formal proposal to the UN that it be moved from the U.S.A. to a neutral country that upholds the UN values of human rights, peace and dignity.

MFI can strengthen its position by connecting with such groups that promote similar values of justice, liberty and human rights. There has been a noticeable under representation and participation of the Muslim NGOs in the side events in the forms of workshops, seminars, caucus' and receptions. MFI can fill in this gap by reserving a space for holding relevant side events in the next CSW conference and allow extra budget for informal net working.