

**CSW58 New York**  
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Why go to the United Nations for a conference about women?<sup>i</sup> The reason I went was because it gave an opportunity to engage with people from other parts of the globe, but also to shine a light on the impact women of faith are making around the world. The theme of CSW58 was to review the Millennium Development Goals<sup>ii</sup> so that new targets could be put in place next year – the halfway point to 2030. In many parts of the world there seems to have been very little progress on achieving some of the goals. Although women number half of the world's population, improving their lot is disproportionately lower than their male counterparts. The opening remarks to the Non-Governmental Officers (NGOs) stated that history is important as we need to listen to the voices of our ancestors. Women want three things, equality, development and peace; we cannot achieve one without the others. We could speed up the progress by ensuring women are given their rights. It is the role of civil society to make sure that governments keep the laws that empower women. By attending CSW we can learn each other's stories and create inspiration and alliances. In both the political and economic spheres we all need to do more to ensure that women are involved in making the decisions that affect us all. "If you educate a man you educate an individual, if you educate a woman you educate a nation". This does not leave men out of the equation, as many of the talks were emphasising the need to engage men and boys in changing attitudes towards women.

A group of school girls from different parts of the world, sponsored by "The Grail" showed how girls and boys need "feminism"; but not the traditional – "women are as good as men and can go it alone". By working together, with men respecting women for the role they play in society, a nation's development can be improved. These young women demonstrated that by empowering women to take a part in social activities, communities can be made to work for the greater good.

A group from Italy talked about the work they were involved in helping migrants and trafficked women. By helping women to realize their personal potential they were able to enter the labour market. This gave them an opportunity to stabilize their family life and so improve communities.

Last year religious leaders were ridiculed for the perceived role they play in undermining the rights of women. This year religious leaders fought back by showing that religious communities have an important part to play in achieving the post 2015 development goals. Religious leaders have respect in their communities and have a forum to reach out to like-minded people. "Any religion that does not give rights to people is a dead religion" said Imman Ali from New York. When more women become scholars and study the Quran, the cultural practices can be questioned. We were reminded of what Kofi Annan said when he was President of Religions for Peace in South Africa "You are one of the most important sections of your society – you are the conscience of your society". Religious leaders are servants of God working for all people. Joe Donnelly from Caritas International said we have been challenged to do something, we have to change the conversation. It is necessary to eradicate indifference.

In another presentation it was stated that mothers should be the best politicians as they care about the security of their children. The quality of future society depends on the quality of life of the parents. We need a human development agenda where mothers are respected and valued. If we put mothers first, we will have the world we want. We need a change of heart more than a change of behaviour. In France women reported that they wanted stable, harmonious relationships that supported families. The whole of society can be improved by legislating for the family – the primary multi-generational group in the community.

Progressio<sup>iii</sup> organized a side event to show that women of faith had much to offer in enabling women's empowerment and equality. "What has faith to do with it?" was answered by a panel of speakers from various backgrounds, representing different beliefs and countries. The aim of the event was to create a safe space for people of different faiths to share their experiences about the role of faith in their lives and the communities in which they work. One of the key messages from the event was that women should be encouraged to study theology and know what their religious books are actually saying to them. Faith Mugisa, an Anglican speaker from Zimbabwe, said: 'When girls are told that they have to marry early, when women are brainwashed by men, when their men tell them that they have to follow strict rules. Women need to study theology. Then they can lead the way in interpreting the studies.'

There was also general agreement that there is a need to create forums for people of different religions to come together. It is very important to learn that we all have the same values and needs even if we worship in a different way. I was the Roman Catholic panelist representing the National Board of Catholic Women. I reminded those present that one hundred years ago, Europe was in a similar state to those countries that we call 'fragile states' nowadays. Women in the Christian Churches formed groups where they were taught, very often by religious, the skills necessary to earn a living and support their families. I was able to say that in The Union of Catholic Mothers, one member in 1930, became the first woman councilor in Manchester. It was the work of the catholic women's organisations which led to the development of the UKs Catholic aid agency CAFOD<sup>iv</sup>, which is now enabling women in "fragile states" to be empowered to help themselves. Farhana, who works for the Al-Mahdi Institute in Birmingham highlighted the role of culture explaining that practices like early child marriage and Female Genital Mutilation are a cultural tradition, not part of Islam: 'We need to study the Quran in its pure words, and not look at tradition and culture which are used to justify practices that are not necessarily part of the religion.' At the end of the event, there was an inspirational thought from Sarah Ann Higgins, a young woman from the USA: 'We are the agents of change. Because if you want to see change in the world, you have to be the change yourself.'

CSW raised some interesting issues and it's only by learning from each other and sharing our ideas that we can ensure that gender equality in political and economic life becomes a reality. We were told by UN Women that if we want to see change we have to get out and support the agreed conclusions.<sup>v</sup>

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i [www.unwomen.org/co/csw/csw58-2014](http://www.unwomen.org/co/csw/csw58-2014)

ii [www.un.org/millenniumgoals](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals)

iii [www.progressio.org.uk](http://www.progressio.org.uk)

<sup>iv</sup> [www.cafod.org.uk](http://www.cafod.org.uk)

<sup>v</sup> [www.unwomen.org/csw58-agreedconclusions](http://www.unwomen.org/csw58-agreedconclusions)