

Commission on the Status of Women62

Report by Federation Programme Director

The 62nd. Session of the Commission on the Status of Women(CSW) was held in New York from 12 March until 23 March at the United Nations (UN) building and other sites. It had two themes. The Priority theme was *“Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls.”* The review theme was : *“ Participation in and access of women to the media, and information and communications technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women.”*

Amongst the over 8000 women who attended were 13 delegates from Soroptimist International of the South West Pacific(SISWP) for many of whom it was their first experience. Thus preparation for delegates occupied considerable time as Soroptimist International papers were distributed and then a series of Drafts for the Agreed Agenda. The paperwork is quite extensive and perhaps overwhelming but it shows what is involved. Despite comments to explain the diversity and extent of the sessions, the scale of the event became obvious when delegates were presented with a booklet with hundreds of choices of events spread out over up to 8 blocks of New York to travel to reach locations for events.

Delegates also had the opportunity to attend side events sponsored by their respective governments as well as see session proceedings, attend the launch of the Decade for Water and make selections of parallel events held outside of the United Nations precinct. Fortunately many were able also to undertake some sightseeing and shows as well.

After registration and receipt of individual grounds passes delegates could attend the NGO/ CSW consultation day followed by a choice between a Country reception for Australians and the Soroptimist International Reception. I attended the former at the Australian Mission to the United Nations and renewed acquaintances and held informal discussions with organisations I had met previously.

After the first day, mornings began at 8.30am with a briefing facilitated by the NGO/CSW committee. These gave updates on negotiations and often had visits from significant individuals. The Secretary-General attended once and said proudly that he was a feminist and outlined changes to have more equitable leadership in the UN. Another discussed plans for celebrations for 5 years for the SDGs, 20 years since the Beijing Platform for Action and 10 years since the creation of UN Women. Civil society Organisations (CSOs) made it obvious that they wished to be involved but some countries are reluctant about this. CSO involvement and their shrinking space for action is an ongoing issue reflective of the conservative pushback around the world. This was also obvious in ongoing discussions about the number of rural women who could not obtain entry visas to attend so their voices and issues could not be heard.

After the morning briefing an SI briefing was held. Initially it was for all but numbers were too great and it was then restricted to core delegations. Early comments on wording and which countries supported input were valuable but it drifted at times into a recital of what had been attended which was not particularly useful. I am not sure how to rework this. Often this was followed by an SI Advocacy meeting so frequently I was not able to attend event until around midday.

Most SISWP delegates followed a theme in sessions they attended be it in health, education , environment or technology. On some days there were over 70 sessions from which to choose. They had the opportunity to hear stories from the front line and to hear authentic voices and this could be confronting at times but also inspirational. This will be the information they will take back to clubs.

They also learned how SISWP fits into the UN work and conveying its importance to clubs is valuable and effective as their voices are personal and committed. All delegates saw how our club work is part of a larger effort, is vital and saw also how much remains to be done.

Advocacy training was available each lunch time and most delegates attended a session. While it helped them to realise how advocacy is done at the UN, it showed also the importance of language and how advocacy was linked to other Treaties, Conventions or Covenants and how this could be used in advocacy at home. The training manual can be downloaded at: <https://www.ngocsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/NGO-Guide-LAYOUT-Main.pdf>

Each night delegates could attend a government briefing which provided an update on the progress of negotiations especially in the second week when discussions became more focussed. I had the opportunity to attend New Zealand and United Kingdom updates also. During the two weeks two regional Caucuses were held where the Pacific region was able to share priorities and concerns. This provided useful insight for me regarding Pacific island issues and the importance of climate change for rural women. One evening our delegates had an opportunity to work with other SI delegates on the language of the Agreed Conclusions which was a valuable experience.

I endeavoured to attend sessions dealing with human rights links, leadership, technology and water but was not always successful as many sessions were overfilled and alternatives had to be selected. This was an option that most delegates had to use at one time as over 8,000 people had to be accommodated.

Our delegation was praised for its enthusiasm, willingness to contribute and knowledge. We all learned something new, learned more about advocacy and had the opportunity to hear the authentic voices and stories of disadvantaged women. We came back more aware of the need of others and of the contribution our efforts at the local level made. We also learned that the major responsibility of CSOs was to hold our government accountable for its agreements at CSW62 and that Human Rights agreements can be a valuable tool in any advocacy that is required.

For SISWP certain lessons were evident:

- The voices of those we wish to assist must be heard and consulted
- Human Rights agreements are a valuable tool
- Advocacy is important
- Civil society has a responsibility to hold its governments accountable
- Civil society needs to defend its space in negotiations.

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