The Priority Theme of the 61st Session of the UN Committee of the Status of Women (CSW), a functional commission of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the concurrent NGO CSW61 Forum 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”

Representatives of Zonta International, an NGO with General Consultative Status with ECOSOC, joined representatives of other NGOs enjoying the same high status, UN Member States representatives and representatives and staff of UN Entities in long meetings which resulted in Agreed Conclusions on the Priority Theme, a number of resolutions on different topics as well as recommendations for further action.

The UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo Ngcuka, summoned up the results of the 61th Session in her Closing Remarks on March 26:

“...The outcomes of CSW61 are important building blocks in our journey that will ensure that 2031 will be a year when we achieve substantive equality.....”


The NGO CSW61 Forum offered two tiers of events,

Side Events (227 all told) usually took place within the UN premises and were hosted by a Permanent Mission to the UN; attendees needed a UN Grounds Pass to attend these – and had to pass security controls every time they entered the premises; NGO’s were issued limited numbers of such passes, and

Parallel Events (about 450) that were open to all CSW attendees and took place in various locations. They were sponsored by NGO’s and each could only sponsor one event.

CSW attendees could also register to attend briefings at Permanent Missions of some Member States.

According to the above mentioned Closing Remarks, “There were more than 3,900 civil society participants at CSW, 89 ministers and 162 Member States that participated in this CSW...”

In her very informative and helpful briefing during the Zonta CSW Orientation on the Sunday before the start of the Forum, our ZI UN Chairman Leslie Wright warned that many of the events would be “over-subscribed” as there were more than 8,600 civil society participants registered, that one had to be flexible and find another meeting to attend if the first choice meeting room was already overflowing. Wise words: especially during the early days most meeting rooms were overfull, attendees leaned along walls and sat on the floors, while others thronged in the doorways, making ingress and egress difficult.
Maximum occupancy numbers were posted on the walls but often disregarded, despite of the initial efforts of the security guards to enforce the regulations. They soon seemed to give up on controlling over eager women! It was difficult to make it between meeting rooms in 15 minutes when the exit was blocked by those pressing in to grab a seat and those trying to get out to their next session or to the bathroom. The women’s bathroom: another crowded place, often running out of toilet paper before the end of the day. The cafeteria closest to the meeting rooms made swinging business with long queues of people hoping to grab some sustenance who were then desperately looking for a seat at a table – younger attendees just sat on the floor along the walls. The first days of meetings were rather chaotic with people desperately trying to find the meeting rooms at the very opposite end of the corridor they had thought those were. Still, it was an energizing chaos and the meetings, though they sometimes started late and ended too late, compensated for the small frustrations. It also became clear that the ideas of queuing and simple curtesy were not globally accepted. The throng of people thinned a little towards the end of the week and was markedly less in the second.

The programs for both the Side Events and the Parallel Events had been available online and the team at ZI had provided helpful lists of events of special interest to Zontians. I had decided to concentrate on Side Events, as I enjoyed the privilege of having been issued a Grounds Pass as D8 UN Committee Chair and wanted to make the best of my opportunities, hoping that other Zontians would attend many of the Parallel Events. It was quite difficult to choose which meetings to attend, especially as many of the ones that interested me ran parallel. In the end, I had made up my schedule for the 7 days I had planned to attend, from 13 to 21 March, following Leslie’s recommendation to check out the program for the beginning of the second week of the Forum. Now I wish I had stayed for the last three days, because I missed some meetings on topics of interest to us Zontians: on child marriage (sponsored by Zimbabwe), on End AIDS (by UNAIDS), on Ending FGM (by Burkina Faso) as well as one by diverse UN Entities that addressed health and education issues, among them Fistula programs.

I could not follow my schedule fully, as some meeting rooms were overflowing before I made it to them, one meeting on FGM never took place - and one day it snowed! New York shut down and so did the UN! It was a pity, as two events on that Tuesday were “Zonta Events” with the U.S. Fund for UNICEF, our host for the preceding Sunday’s Orientation Meeting. Still, I managed to attend 26 different meetings, as well as the Zonta Orientation and the Zonta Dinner hosted by the Zonta Club of New York in the historic National Arts Club.

My intent is to write a more detailed report on the major themes discussed at the meetings to be posted in the D8 Dropbox. The meetings followed nearly all the same format: a moderator introduced the topic and the panelists, each of whom then gave a statement, followed by a Q&A period and final statements by the panelists. It was sometimes difficult to hear all that was said, both because of noisy audiences, malfunctioning head phones or lack thereof, softness of some speakers’ voices and limited mastery of English. Here is just a quick overview of what was discussed:

Women in the global north and the global south - and in the in-between countries – face some similar barriers to reaching their full economic potential, while traditions and cultural norms make it even more difficult for women and girls in some parts of the world to do so – and then there are the very special problems and dangers that refugee and migrant women and girls face. Reproductive rights that allow women to determine the number and frequency of pregnancies, safe birthing practices, shared parental leave, early childhood education, affordable child care, equal chances for girls to education — often cut
short when they reach adolescence, both due to tradition, parental preferences and lack of accessible hygiene products and separate and safe washrooms/latrines – all would enable women and girls to flourish. Harmful societal norms and stereotypes of what are male and female jobs prevent girls from branching out into non-traditional, male dominated fields. Traditional burdens of household, child and elder care ought to be shared by both genders. Rural and indigenous women face special barriers in many parts of the world: no access to land and credit, lack of training and/or societal support. Women’s farming cooperatives can help as well as training and government support for improved farming, processing and marketing practices. Special attention was paid to the plight of refugee women and girls, and to the situation of migrant female workers who are often exploited in the informal sector, in badly paid and in domestic work. Preventing Violence against Women not only in the workplace, but also en route to it, was another concern as were the effects of domestic violence on women in the workplace. Women’s role in peace making and sustaining was addressed, as was their role in countering violent extremism.

Four “Special Events” stood out for me:

- The launch of the Equal Pay Platform of Champions
- “Supporting Feminist Movement Building for Planet 50-50 by 2013”, a meeting of diverse groups in the historic Great Hall of the Cooper Union
- “The Gender Equality Seal Certification Programme for the Private Sector: Leveraging the Role of the Private Sector in Promoting Women’s Economic Empowerment and Achieving the SDGS”

Special mention is due to the Parallel Event “Opening the Door to Economic Empowerment for Women and Girls”, sponsored by Soroptimist International and moderated by our ZI President Sonja Hönig Schough.

The Side Event “Economic Security, Violence against Women and the Workplace”, hosted by ZI and the Permanent Mission of Zambia to the UN was well attended and graced by the presence of the First Lady of the Republic of Zambia who welcomed the attendees. Three outstanding Zontians spoke: Leslie Wright gave the opening introduction, Sonja Hönig Schough made introductory remarks and Simone Ovart, member of the ZI UN Committee and “our woman in Geneva” was one of the panelists. (I was so proud to be a Zontian that evening!).

I was disappointed not to be able to attend the 12th International Helvi Sipilä Seminar “Empowered Futures – Sustainable Economies” because it fell on the same evening as the Zonta dinner.

Restrainted by the logistics of getting in and out of the UN premises, I stayed in between meetings and had ample opportunity to enjoy some of the pieces of art that Member States had donated, as well as a special display in the vast Public Lobby of the General Assembly Building dedicated to Women at the UN. Three of my heroines were given their due, if not with the best images: Eleanor Roosevelt, Helvi Sipilä and Margaret Snyder. Helvi’s role in Zonta was mentioned, but not Peggie’s – what a shame!
Attending the NGO CSW 61 Forum at the UN Headquarters was a great privilege! At least since 1961, the autumn of the death of the then Secretary General of the UN Dag Hammarskjöld, had I dreamt of visiting this place. It was with great reverence that I made my slippery way along the Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza every morning and it was with awe that I paid tribute to another hero of mine, Raoul Wallenberg, when passing the monument in his memory on the way to the daily round of Side Events.

I am eternally grateful to my District 8 Governor and fellow Zontians for giving me the opportunity to once again be their UN Committee Chair!

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