



CSW61

Henrietta Schoeman reports from New York

This year's session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) took place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, from 13 to 24 March 2017. Representatives of Member States, UN entities, and ECOSOC-accredited non-government organisations (NGOs) from all regions of the world attended the session.

I attended CSW61 at my own expense and was accompanied by World President, Ruth Shanks and UN Committee Chair, Kerry Maw-Smith. The Priority Theme of the 61st session was: *'Women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work.'*

The world of work is changing fast, spurred by innovation, globalization and increasing human mobility. At the same time, it is adversely impacted by climate change, humanitarian crises, rising informality of labour and economic inequality. For sustainable and healthy economies, the world of work must empower women and remove the persisting inequalities that hold women back from getting on equal footing with men.

Thousands of women thronged conference chambers of the UN building where the main agenda was being passionately debated. This meant that these chambers were often filled to capacity. However, it was also possible to participate in Side Events and Parallel Events that were hosted by various government delegations and NGOs, respectively, in smaller venues away from the main hall.

I attended a Side Event on the afternoon of the 15 March that was hosted by the European Union (EU). It was entitled: *'A Year of Focused Actions to Combat Violence against Women and Girls.'*

The EU Program Director explained that in November 2016, the European Commission had launched a year of focused actions to put an end to violence against women and girls. He said that although a lot has been said and legislation to protect women is in place in many countries, violence against women still persists. He stressed that their biggest problem is a total lack of adequate data.

Dr Helena Dahli, the Minister for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties from Malta said that her country was one of the last within the EU to legislate against perpetrators of violence against women. She stressed that NGO's who are working with victims and survivors are the experts and they should be consulted by governments to help them draft new laws. She said that many women who are victims of violence also become victims of homelessness.

Doreen Sioka, Minister of Gender and Child Welfare in Namibia suggested that a holistic approach to dealing with the offense should be followed by governments, NGO's, churches, law, (including police officers) and our communities working together.

The Principal Advisor on Gender at the UN, Ambassador Mara Marinaki, said that all 17 Sustainable Development Goal's are either directly or indirectly affected by violence against women. In the last 44 years, violence has killed the same number of women worldwide as cancer. Women need the confidence to say 'No'.

The Assistant Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), Dr Flavia Bustreo mentioned that one women in three will suffer violence in her lifetime. This has an impact on both her physical and mental health. The plan of action should include zero tolerance to violence. Health workers and medical doctors must never condone violence. She also mentioned that the key problem is that only 50% of countries have data on this issue.

A Federal Judge from Brazil, Valtor de Araujo, told us that he now separates homicides from femicides (gender-based hate crimes) by marking his criminal files.

Ana Sofia Fernandes from Euro Gender, called on the EU to take firmer action and strengthen public education to prevent victims from keeping quiet due to a fear of stigma.

During the meeting I met Elizabeth Williams, the Chief of Staff of the Canadian Human Rights Commission who gave me suggestions on how to go about trying to get governments to take note of ACWW's Resolutions. She suggested that we request a meeting with the Human Rights section of the Foreign Ministries. This could be a way to get the word out about the International Forum on Rural Women initiative.

My take-away from this meeting was that, since there is a lack of data on women's vulnerabilities, we should keep on trying to get feedback from members at grassroots level, as this information is relevant and should be shared with other NGO's and UN Women. Appropriate actions, including legislation, that can reduce violence against women can only be implemented if the correct data is available.

It is clear that our attendance and engagement with international colleagues and global policy-makers is crucial, and that ACWW can play a critical role in bridging the information gap between civil society, governments and our membership.