



# YOUTH & THEIR SOCIAL IMPACT

## ACWW attends the UNESCO NGO Liaison Forum in Saudi Arabia

As a member of the UNESCO NGO Network, ACWW was invited to attend the NGO Liaison Committee Forum in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in May 2017. The subject of the Forum was 'Youth and their Social Impact', with a focus on equal access and sustainable progress on global youth issues. The Forum was organised in association with UNESCO by the Riyadh-based MiSK Foundation, who generously sponsored the attendance, travel and costs of all international delegates, including ACWW's Nick Newland. ACWW's delegation was completed by Ms Suraiya Moiz and Ms Natasha Ozier, both from Malaysia. Ms Moiz's mother-in-law will be familiar to readers, as she is former Area President for South East Asia and the Far East, HRH Princess Azizah Iskandar.

This opportunity was a great one for ACWW, as we currently have no members or member societies in the Middle East. We have also found that attending UN and specifically UNESCO events is crucial to our mission and our ability to engage with policy makers, funders and change-makers on the global stage. This Forum was the first UNESCO conference to be held in the Arab world, and the largest ever gathering of international NGOs and charitable bodies in the Middle East. More than 2,070 delegates attended, with over 400 NGOs represented and with participants from more than 75 countries.

The first day of the Forum was an informal 'meet and greet' day, set in a resort in the middle of the desert. The vast majority of the international delegates attended, and whilst it may seem whimsical, the day was really very important. Not only did everyone start to talk amongst themselves and make new connections, but the day itself was a chance for us to engage with our Saudi hosts.

The groundbreaking nature of this Forum and its setting were not lost on anyone, particularly when an impromptu game of football (soccer to those outside of the UK!) kicked-off. Why was this important? It was started by female members of the Saudi organising staff challenging their male counterparts, and suddenly a 30 person game featuring players from every faith, a great range of nations and both sexes had erupted with gales of laughter and enthusiasm. Whilst many of us took a turn playing, participation was kept short by the heat and need for a bottle of water! It may or may not have been the first ever mixed game of football in Saudi history, but it played a superb role in 6 | [www.acww.org.uk](http://www.acww.org.uk)



Sokunpharady Kao and Yen Heng (*Youth Star Cambodia*), Sherihan Akkawi (*Organisation De Developpement Durable, ODDD, Lebanon*); Rind el Hage (*Net-Med Youth, Lebanon*); Seughee Amy Oh (*CCIVS, South Korea*); Yara Hijazi (*Development for People and Nature Association, Lebanon*); Nick Newland (*ACWW*) and Victoria Ibiwoye (*OneAfricanChild, Nigeria*) at the UNESCO NGO Forum in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in May 2017.

setting the scene for the next three days of cooperation, collaboration and discussion.

It was on this first day that I met several delegations from Lebanon, and heard about their impressive work; Mostafa Baydoun of LOYAC (a youth development NGO which takes arts education into refugee camps), Yara Hijazi of the Development for People and Nature Association, Sherihan Akkawi and Reina Hamdan of the Organisation De Developpement Durable (ODDD) and Rind el Hage of Net-Med Youth (who happened also to be the youngest delegate at 19, and the youngest speaker at the Forum). It was a pleasure to spend time learning about their different organisations, and I am delighted that the latter four ladies are in the process of becoming Individual Members of ACWW since the Forum.

The opening ceremony of the Forum was on Wednesday morning, with a keynote address from Her Excellency Noura al Kaabi, the female Minister of State for Federal National Council Affairs of the United Arab Emirates. There were also speeches from His Excellency Dr Ali Nasser Alghafis, the Minister of Labour and Social Development for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO and Her Royal Highness Banderi A.R. Al Faisal, the Director General of the King Khalid Foundation.



Two of the inspiring speakers at #UNESCOMiSK

What became immediately obvious as the sessions began and interventions were welcomed from the floor of the Forum, was that delegates were welcome to engage and comment on any topic, and without reservation. The role of women in our global community, and particularly the developing and broadening role played by women in Saudi society was a large part of this discussion, with most speakers referring to the crucial input of women at every level.

The majority of topics discussed, and factors that arose from them (Water and food

security, access to education for hard-to-reach communities, peace and stability, youth engagement in the political process etc) were relevant to ACWW and rural women, and the large number of women delegates and speakers (around 40% women delegates, 50% women speakers) was groundbreaking both in terms of Saudi Arabia, and indeed UNESCO and international meetings in general. The field of discussion was broadened further by Brian Rusch, Executive Director of the Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation highlighted the need for international engagement with LGBT+ rights alongside equal access blind to gender, disability and nationality.

The breakout session on Equal Opportunities was hugely constructive – particularly as it gave a greater insight into the living conditions of women in Saudi Arabia, and challenged many of the assumptions and assertions made by those in the West. This session was attended by 255 people, of whom 220 were women.

During the breakout session, and in response to questions from young Saudi Arabian women about the 'West's view' of equality in Saudi, I indicated that ACWW was a global organisation, and did not feel it helpful to assume a position of moral superiority, particularly when we lack contextual information about other cultures. Specifically, when French and British delegates had pointed at issues in Saudi and were disagreed with by the women supposedly facing them, I suggested that we should listen to the women themselves on the issues that most affected them. This led to discussion of ACWW's forthcoming Global Survey of the living conditions of rural women, and situational understanding of local issues affecting women around the world. The point was met with applause and agreement, and reported back to the main forum when the moderator gave her report of the breakout.

There has been much criticism of Saudi Arabia when it comes to the rights of women, and much press coverage recently of the Kingdom's appointment to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). I was very lucky to have the rare opportunity to engage in free and unfettered conversation with more than 30 women from Saudi Arabia during the Forum, from school students to university professors. What became abundantly clear was that whilst there are issues to be addressed within the Kingdom, it is far more helpful to address the issues Saudi women consider problems, than those the West judges to be problematic. There is a genuine fear that whilst the Kingdom has become more liberal and taken more steps towards progressing equality in the past three years, much of the rest of the world has become more divided and more nationalistic.



Rind el Hage (Net-Med Youth, Lebanon); Seughee Amy Oh (CCIVS, South Korea) and Nick Newland

There is a significant fear that ignorance and Islamophobia are covered in the guise of concern for women's rights. Whilst these women made it clear that issues needed to be addressed, they had no interest in abandoning elements of their culture that are perhaps poorly understood by those in other countries.

One lady from Saudi Arabia spoke eloquently about her situation: *"I am empowered in many ways. I am, by law, paid the same as men who do the same job as I do, and I am empowered by being here, at this Forum, and speaking my views in public. I am not empowered when I am late for the Forum because I have to wait for a man to drive me here"*. Other women questioned legal grey areas, such as whether women may ride bicycles in Saudi Arabia - the law is clear that they may not drive cars, but there is no mention of bikes!

Whilst there is no intention of glossing over issues that are important, it is also crucial that we have better engagement with this part of the world so we can fully understand the difficulties that women face on a daily basis, without the hysteria of press coverage and hyperbole. It is clear that Saudi Arabia is raising generations of well educated, talented and inspiring women and that they are playing an ever-broadening role in the development of their country.

As we mention inspiring women, and broadening the reach of ACWW around the world, I am glad to report that one of the impacts of our attendance at the Forum has been engaging with new organisations and individuals from countries and areas that have traditionally hard to reach for ACWW. In the next few weeks, we will have confirmed new members in Nigeria, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Egypt, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and

Lebanon. This is very important for ACWW as not only does it open up new avenues of communication around the world, but allows us to better inform and influence the global community, policy makers and funding bodies with regards the needs of rural women.

ACWW was offered significant opportunities to network – reconnecting with existing contacts from previous UNESCO, UN-related or ACWW events (such as Soroptomist International), as well as meeting a huge number of new contacts. These included the Executive Director of the Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation, Director of Strategic Alliances at the Hult Prize Foundation, Miss Elham Al-Sanie, Director of Programmes and Grants Department at the King Khaled Foundation (Saudi Arabia's second biggest public funder) and around 40 other organisations who expressed interest in participating in the Global Survey, including implementing it in Palestinian and Sudanese IDP and refugee camps.

This was a hugely positive Forum which broke new ground in several ways. The largest gathering of NGOs in Saudi history; unprecedented engagement on topics not often discussed (women's rights, sustainable education and access to education, LGBT rights and equality) and a firm commitment from the Saudi government to broadening equal access for younger generations moving forward with the UN's 2030 Agenda, as well as their own National Transformation Agenda. For ACWW specifically, commitments to membership, supporting our agenda and potential funding for the global survey and projects were measurable outcomes. Additionally, ACWW was listed as No.3 in the top 5 Forum Influencers by the hosts, and our media coverage of the Forum was significant. More than 79,000 references were made using the #UNESCOmiSK hashtag throughout the Forum, and @acww\_news was acknowledged as an online change-maker during the week.

We must thank the MiSK Foundation for their generosity in supporting the Forum and ACWW's attendance, and the people of Riyadh for making us feel so welcome. The organising team at UNESCO, and the NGO Liaison Committee are also due thanks for their tireless efforts. As you have seen elsewhere in this issue, the Projects Committee celebrates its 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year. Between the foundation of ACWW in 1929 and 1977, the focus of our organisation's work was advocacy and international representation, ensuring that the voices of millions of women worldwide were heard. This element of our work remains as crucial today. Reaching new audiences and helping empower women in new areas is critical, allowing us to raise the volume of rural women's voices globally.