



UNANIMA International at the 62nd Commission on the Status of Women: 12-23 March 2018

The 62nd Commission on the Status of Women (CSW62) commenced at the United Nations on Monday, 14 March 2018. It was preceded by the NGO CSW Consultation Day on Sunday, 11 March. It is simply impossible to give you a picture of all that takes place at the CSW, the biggest commission held at UN Headquarters in New York. It is estimated that over 4,300 Civil Society (non-government) representatives attended the conference from 130 countries around the world. This year's theme was addressing the "rights and empowerment of rural women and girls."

The Commission was attended by a number of our members from the UI family, including members of UI congregations and students from several Ursuline secondary schools in the USA. All of us present were concerned about girls and women who live in rural areas and who face multiple forms of discrimination throughout their lives: poverty, food insecurity, violence, trafficking, racial discrimination, and violations of human rights.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres held a town hall-style discussion on the margins of CSW62. He talked of the continued struggle for gender equality. He said **"it is indeed civil society that is being in the forefront of this struggle Without Civil Society leadership and pressure, I doubt we would be where we are today."**

On Friday, 16 March, UN Women and Civil Society partners convened a dialogue on the sidelines of the CSW62 with people from rural areas. The conversation brought together diverse constituencies from around the world to discuss what it would take to leave no woman or girl in any rural area behind in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Opening the half day event, Lopa Banerjee, Director of UN Women's Civil Society Division, said, "This is truly a tipping point. The fact that this Commission (CSW) is shining a light on the condition of women and girls in rural areas is very fitting, because they face some of the most daunting challenges of our time." We heard many stories from rural women and girls of what 'leaving no one behind' meant for them. We heard stories of the Widows' Rights Movement's call to end the stigmatization and exploitation of widows. Others spoke of the land rights of indigenous women and girls, and highlighted the importance of implementing policy and legislation within rural communities. Many women emphasized the importance of women living in rural areas as agents of change in their homes and communities. Rural women and girls are often deeply excluded from discussions that shape their own development and that of the communities, countries, and world in which they live. The women have called for greater representation in local and national governments; universal application of existing legislation protecting women and girls' rights; continued conversation with the UN, governments, and NGOs; investment in rural youth; and attention to the voices of the most marginalized women and girls.

UNANIMA's Contributions

UNANIMA International co-sponsored two side events in relation to the issue of human trafficking. One was organized in conjunction with several other NGOs representing Religious Sisters and the Holy See Mission. It showcased the work of Religious Sisters in the prevention of human trafficking and the rescue and empowerment of survivors. The common narrative of rural women lured into big cities by the false promises of traffickers and forced into sex slavery was described at the keynote speech of the event by survivor Mely Lenario from the Philippines. Mely told her story of being forced into sex slavery. She escaped thanks to the support of women and men Religious. She is now studying social work and serves other trafficking survivors as an outreach worker and “survivor advocate” employed by the sisters who helped her in the Philippines. A second event on this topic, entitled “Equality through Technology: Human Trafficking Survivors Reclaiming Life,” featured a panel of speakers who provide opportunities for trafficking survivors in the field of computer science and communication technology. The panelists described how they are using the field as an instrument for women’s empowerment. They were joined by the testimonies of two trafficking survivors and that of Ruth Faircloth from the Rural & Migrant Ministry, who spoke of her lived experience as a rural woman. Ruth talked of enslavement-like conditions in a rural area of New York State. She told of the challenges and difficulties faced by her rural community and their lack of access to basic resources in society that should be available to them. The most inspirational speakers both of these events were the survivors who used the significant platform to tell their stories from their lived experiences with passion and determination to move toward a new way of life.

UNANIMA was also involved in two events related to the protection of water in the context of mining activities. The first event, entitled “Frontline Leadership: Rural Women in the Anti-Fracking Movement” featured several rural women who played significant roles in the restriction or ban of fracking or natural gas pipeline installation in Ireland and in the U.S. States of New York, Kentucky, and Maryland. Speakers discussed the implications of fracking and natural gas pipelines on rural communities, and especially on women and girls; their respective roles successful campaigns to ban fracking or the installation of pipelines in their communities; their key opposition strategies that have the potential to be applied elsewhere; and the status of ongoing campaigns against fracking and pipelines. Video of the event can be viewed here: <https://www.facebook.com/NGOMWG/videos/986162918219680/>. The second event on water was entitled “Wisdom, Rural Women and Water: Unmuting Women’s Voices for Integrated Water Policy.” It detailed the ways in which unjust water policies disproportionately impact rural women and the dangers of the oft-proposed policy “solutions” of water privatization and desalination. Full-length video of this event is available here: <https://www.facebook.com/NGOMWG/videos/987000648135907/>.

As a leading organization in the NGO Committee on Migration, UNANIMA partnered with other NGOs and the Mission of Bangladesh to the UN to organize a high-level panel discussion held inside UN Headquarters during CSW62, which was moderated by UI’s Executive Assistant, Teresa Blumenstein. The event, entitled “Shouldering the Burden: Climate-Induced Displacement and Rural Women,” featured a conversation among experts from various regions and backgrounds, including multiple representatives of Bangladesh’s Ministry for Women and Children Affairs; the Executive Director of UN Women; a representative of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) from Mozambique; a specialist on climate change, environment, and migration from the International Organization for Migration (IOM); and a representative of civil society with experience in Vanuatu. Panelists shared their expertise on the effects of climate change on rural women, especially those living in areas so stressed by environmental degradation that they, or members of their families, are ultimately forced to migrate for survival. Video

of the event can be viewed here:

<https://www.facebook.com/ngomigrationcommittee/videos/1890694497622125/>.

As illustrated by these events and the many others UNANIMA delegates had the privilege to attend during CSW62, the significance of rural women and girls can hardly be overstated. They make up over a quarter of the world's population and around 43% of the agricultural workforce in developing countries. Women are a sizeable group with a lot of potential, yet they are overlooked and marginalized. Looking at this year's theme, one woman pointed out to me that an appropriate alternative theme might have been "rural struggles in a concrete jungle." It is hard to miss the irony of holding a conference to discuss women and girls living in rural areas in one of the largest cities in the world and in midst of very fast-paced, metropolitan New York City life. Throughout the two weeks during which they were sharing their experiences, rural women repeated a sentiment I heard for many years when working with the homeless: **"Not about us without us."** Unfortunately, we know that, even in the UN, a space that pays more attention to this sentiment than many of the world's halls of power, many women from rural and remote regions of the world who were invited to participate in CSW62 were denied travel visas by US Embassies and therefore unable to take part in the conversation.

Agreed Conclusions

The outcome of the Commissions consideration of the priority theme during this CSW62 took the form of agreed conclusions, negotiated by member states. The commission adopted agreed conclusions on "challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls." They can be read in full here: <http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/62/outcome/csw62-agreed-conclusions-advanced-unedited-version-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3837>.

