

# CSW62 - My Experience

Written by Belinda Lee, SI Auckland Inc.

I couldn't have been more excited about my trip to New York to attend CSW62. First time ever in the USA and also the opportunity to go to the UN to be part of CSW62 – incredible! New York certainly didn't disappoint! It was everything I thought it would be and more. Just like you see in the movies only better; the glaringly bright but beautiful lights of Times Square, the gorgeous Art Deco architecture of the Rockefeller Centre, the incredibly beautiful halls of Grand Central Station – New York is so familiar it was almost like a home away from home.



*View from the hotel room!*



*Freezing cold - in Times Square*

I arrived in New York late at night – it was bitterly cold. It had been snowing – apparently there had been a storm blow through New York earlier in the week. After a huge sleep in it was off to the UN Security Offices to register and collect my delegates pass. We queued for an hour, only to be hustled into another area to queue for another hour! Finally registration was complete with UN delegate pass in hand. The rest of the afternoon was spent walking the streets of Manhattan – Times Square, Grand Central Station, Lexington Street – just mind blowing! That night I could hardly sleep, I was so excited to get out and about the next day to check out more of the Big Apple.



*At the UN, the famous Globe ...*



*... and the famous gun*

The very first event for me was the Consultation Day run by NGO CSW. The priority theme of CSW62 was discussed in detail: **Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls**. We heard how gender and geographic inequalities mean that rural women and girls are disproportionately affected by poverty, exclusion and the effects of environmental change. Rural women often work in low-paid jobs with poor conditions and limited access to social protection and this means they are often more susceptible to abuse. Poor infrastructure in rural areas means that access to clean drinking water and safe sanitation facilities combined with long distances to health services compounds the already high rates of maternal death and poor reproductive and sexual health. We also heard how other harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) are more prevalent in some rural areas. All of these conditions are then further exacerbated by limited access to effective legal, judicial and institutional remedies.



*At the Consultation Day*



*My UN CSW62 Delegate Pass*

The last time Rural Women was the subject of the priority theme at CSW56 (in 2012) there was no Outcome Document (Agreed Conclusions). The principal output of CSW is the Agreed Conclusions on priority themes set for each year. Agreed Conclusions contain analysis of the priority theme and a set of concrete recommendations for governments, intergovernmental bodies and other institutions, civil society and other relevant stakeholders to be implemented

at international, national, regional and local level. NGO CSW Chair Dr Susan O'Malley said that one of the reasons this happened was that "the voices of rural women were not heard, others spoke for them. At CSW62 we intend to rectify that".



*At one of the morning briefings*



*Inside one of the main rooms at the UN, ready for a Side Event*

And so this set the scene for me for CSW62. It was apparent that the next week was going to be a complete eye opener for me. That evening I caught up with some of the other New Zealand Soroptimists who were also attending CSW62 and we discussed which sessions we would all be attending over the next five days. CSW is basically broken down into three areas. The first is the talks and negotiations on the Agreed Conclusions by government delegations; these talks all take place inside the UN. Then there are Side Events which are also held in the UN; these are made up of discussions and presentations from government and non-government organisations. The third are the Parallel Events which are organised by NGOs around the Priority and Review themes and these sessions are held away from the UN. It was interesting to see who was going to be attending which sessions and which sessions we would be attending with each other! Even though we all finalised our schedules these changed on a daily basis!

Day One of CSW62 started off with a hiss and a roar – I was super excited to be attending a Parallel Event called "Investing in the Hardest to Reach Girls: Challenges and Opportunities". I set off with my map feeling confident I was heading in the right direction. When I arrived at the Empire State Building (!!) I thought to myself – how wonderful it was that these events were being held at such iconic New York landmarks! My wonder turned to woe when I realised I was at the wrong address – I had gone to 4 West 34<sup>th</sup> Street (yes, the Empire State Building!) instead of 4 West 43<sup>rd</sup>!! I knew I wouldn't make it all the way back to 43<sup>rd</sup> Street in time for the session so I grabbed a coffee and made my way to the next session!

The sessions I ended up attending throughout the week were interesting, thought provoking and sad – in fact some were just downright devastating. It was tough listening to personal accounts of forced/child marriage, human trafficking, sexual violence, discrimination, racism, corruption, displacement and forced labour. However it was also inspiring to hear from those who are committed to ensuring that rural women's voices are heard and learning about how civil society is working with government on legislation and policy to bring about change.



Each evening there was also a New Zealand delegation meeting, where all of the NZ delegates gathered to talk through the events of the day. These sessions were really interesting as we got to hear what the government delegation had been doing during the day as well as hearing how the negotiations were going with respect to the Agreed Outcomes. It was also a good opportunity to network and reconnect with old friends!



*One of the New Zealand Delegation meetings*

Of all of the sessions, side events and parallel events I attended over the week a few really stood out:

**Harmful and Deadly: Child Marriage and Maternal Mortality in Rural Settings:** There were five women on the panel of this session including NZ's Helen Potiki, Ministry of Women NZ. This session really highlighted the fact that child marriage is a complex and multifaceted issue which requires intervention from all levels of government and all facets of society. For example: Nepal is highly patriarchal, and women are forced into pregnancy with very little control over their own bodies and no access to contraception. The Medical curriculum is largely patriarchal as well so there is little consideration given to women's healthcare in general. Although the recent legalisation of abortion law in Nepal is helping reduce infant mortality rates, and the legal age of marriage has been raised to 20, progress is still slow in Nepal with respect to these issues. Unfortunately, laws are not enough – only 45% of women in Nepal understand the laws around abortion.

Child marriage is largely driven by cultural and gender norms which need to be addressed if we are to make change. There are significant linkages between child marriage, adolescent pregnancy and maternal health and more work needs to be done to educate rural women and girls on the realities of child/forced marriage.

There are some great projects underway aiming to address these issues head on: in Pakistan there are programmes running in schools where girls are being taught about their sexual and reproductive rights, so they can be active in advocating for their own rights. Information is

provided around contraceptives as well as the negative consequences of early marriage. Girls are also being informed on the realities of marriage as well – often these young girls have glorified ideas of marriage when in reality early marriage is far from that.

In Zambia a national plan to end child marriage has been developed. Young expectant mothers receive free healthcare services. There are routine healthcare programmes in place for young rural mothers and free HIV testing, counselling and treatment is available. There is also work being done with religious leaders in this space which is also reducing the number of child marriages in the country. Child marriage puts children at increased risk of violence, so the support also includes life skills. Reducing child marriage also means empowering girls. Sexual health is being taught at school to empower girls about their sexuality; boys are included in this as well.

**Preventing Human Trafficking among Rural Women and Girls: Integrating Inherent Dignity into a Human Rights Model:** This session addressed key aspects relating to the trafficking of rural women, human rights, the denial of human dignity, and human agency. Rural women and girls are particularly vulnerable to traffickers who promise food, security, etc. This is hugely attractive as 85% of women in backbreaking poverty are in rural settings. They are easy prey for traffickers, their dignity and rights are not respected before they are trafficked. They have no money, no access to education, no access to healthcare, sanitation is sparse. They could be hundreds of miles from the nearest city with no NGOs or public services in the vicinity, and traffickers know all of this. They know parents of children in these areas are easily deceived and at times are so desperate that they will sell their own children. They promise opportunities in the city – promising education in return for work or money. So often the origin of this is rural and prevention means going to the source. Listening to a survivor of trafficking was tough. I think the whole room went completely silent when she said, “Human dignity was an aspiration and not a reality”. However harrowing, the importance of first-hand accounts of trafficking as shared by women survivors provide key insights that no academic research can. We need to challenge the dominant narrative from believing that trafficking is a random occurrence to understanding that it is a systemic failure for marginalised women.

**#Me Too: Rural Women, Migrant Women, Sexual Assault and Criminal Justice:** This session had a profound impact on me. It was incredibly upsetting to hear how rural and migrant women working in the agricultural industry in the USA are exposed to increasing levels of sexual harassment and abuse, threats of deportation and modern-day slavery.

I learned that for decades, most female farmworkers in the US have experienced substandard wages and working conditions. Well-documented challenges in the work environment have included physical and verbal abuse, sexual harassment and abuse, discrimination, and high fatal and non-fatal injury rates. These women have also faced endemic wage theft, resulting in widespread violation of minimum wage laws. Recently, the US Department of Agriculture reported that farmworkers “remain among the most economically disadvantaged working groups in the United States,” and that “poverty among farmworkers is more than double that of all wage and salary employees.” In the extreme, they have faced situations of modern-day slavery – women have been held against their will, with the threat or actual use of violence, and forced to work for little or no money.



*Art Deco Subway Station*



*View from the Top of the Rock*

Since 2011, this reality has dramatically changed for many rural women in the agricultural industry, thanks to the Fair Food Program (FFP). The FFP brings together workers, consumers, growers and retail food companies in support of fair wages and humane labour standards in the agricultural industry. The FFP is a human rights program that is designed, monitored, and enforced by the very workers whose rights it is intended to protect. The main aspects of the programme are:

1. Demands for the workers – they are paid a bonus of a penny per pound of tomatoes harvested
2. Code of conduct for rights for workers – abuse in the field will now have consequences
3. Corporations can only purchase from providers that have a zero-tolerance policy

Since 2001, 14 major food corporations have signed on to the agreement and this covers 90% of all of the tomato companies in Florida. The programme also includes of worker to worker education sessions held in the fields where the workers are educated about their rights. There is a 24 hour hotline where workers can report abuse. This means that women in this industry now have the right to work with dignity and no fear of retaliation if abuse is reported, which is huge step forward!

After this session ended I was handed a flyer for a march – “Time’s Up Wendy’s”. Wendy’s is the only fast food chain that has refused to join the FFP. Burger King, McDonald’s, Subway, and Taco Bell are all on board, and yet Wendy’s has held out. Not surprisingly, Wendy’s refusal to get on board with basic human rights has become increasingly problematic—and that all came to a head the week of CSW62. The group who organised the march, many of whom were women, sought to highlight the sexual violence many female workers are



subjected to within the industry; a commitment to the FFP from Wendy's would give a voice to this risk. The Freedom Fast, as it was nicknamed, represented a brave continuation of the #MeToo movement from a particularly marginalised demographic.

I decided to get my activist on and participate in the march – what an experience! There were literally thousands of people gathered to participate – I had never seen anything quite like it before, except for on television. I was handed a poster, quickly picked up the chant and we were off! We had a police escort; the roads were closed – it was awesome. The energy from the protesters was incredible – no aggression whatsoever just determination to get their message across. Disappointingly, Wendy's has still not signed the FFP.



*Some of the marchers - Time's Up Wendy's*



*Me getting my activist on!*

**Policy and Legislative Intervention on Empowering the Girl Child in Nigeria – Education, Health, Early Marriage, Irregular Migration and Forced Labour:** This session was really powerful. Listening to stories about the corruption in Nigeria, the divide between the wealthy and those living in poverty was heartbreaking.

Young girls are denied access to quality health, education and wellbeing and as a result they continually grow up with no aspirations. They are then forced into either child marriage or illegal migration – forced into sex work, slave labour. For many young girls this is their reality.

The Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) works on policy and legislative policy issues in Nigeria. Their view is that current policy does not empower young girls, women, rural women or women in general in Nigeria. They say that there is a complete lack of economic empowerment for women in Nigeria. Women work very hard for no pay – this is modern day slavery and this is all due to absence of policy and legislation surrounding basic human rights such as education, healthcare, etc. CISLAC says that we have a moral obligation to ensure that government is reminded that they are not just signing protocols but that these also need to be implemented, as implementation is a huge issue in Nigeria.

CISLAC is urging the Nigerian government to address key areas for rural women and girls. Education must be transparent and sexual education, health and nutrition must be taught. Keeping girls in school as long as possible could help mitigate early/forced marriage.

Government is being urged to prioritise and incentivise education for girls through grants and provisions for families to send their girls to school. They say that policies need to be costed and founded in order for them to be implemented. They are also asking the Government to look at poverty reduction programmes: the government needs to shift to be pro-poor and pro-jobs.

CISLAC is also working with Civil Society in Nigeria to ensure that statistics on trafficking are being monitored and that there is more advocacy and awareness of the situations for these girls abroad. Government must partner with civil society to ensure that trafficked women and girls are brought home safely and with dignity – as unfortunately this is not always the case for these traumatised and victimised people. They are also advocating to raise awareness on the rights of Migrants and partnering with health ministries to promote integration of gender responsive HIV prevention programmes.



*A real New York fire truck!*



*Some artwork on the High Line*

I could honestly talk for days and days about all of the sessions I attended and all of the stories I heard! Somehow, in amongst all of the sessions I attended, I also found time to explore New York. What a city! Highlights for me were walking across the Brooklyn Bridge (twice!), riding the Subway without getting lost, visiting Ground Zero, walking the High Line, visiting the Chelsea Markets and the Whitney Museum, the super-informative tour of the Rockefeller Centre and the view from the “Top of the Rock”, taking the Staten Island Ferry to see the Statue of Liberty, the glamour of Fifth Avenue, the bright lights of Times Square, walking through Mood Fabrics (from the TV show Project Runway), eating bagels for breakfast *every day* and of course just the general hustle and bustle of New York City.







*Me at Mood Fabrics!*



*Outside the Rockefeller Centre, in front of St Patrick's Cathedral*

Another highlight was attending a reception held at the New Zealand Permanent Mission to the United Nations. This reception was attended by many members of the NZ delegation for CSW62 including all five NZ Soroptimists who attended, the Human Rights Commissioner, and the NZ Minister for Women! I was honoured to attend and even more honoured to wear the New Zealand Soroptimist korowai (cloak), Te Amo Oranganui Ki Te Au (Bearer of Wellbeing to the World).



*With Julie Anne Genter, Minister for Women*



*Super proud to wear Te Amo Oranganui Ki Te Au*

Participating in CSW62 has been one of the most incredible experiences of my life and it is definitely something that I will never forget. I can honestly say that hearing about the



situations that some women and girls endure on a daily basis was harrowing and heartbreaking but learning about the work that is being done to change this and empower these women is heartwarming and inspiring.

I feel privileged to have been part of this year's Soroptimist delegation to CSW62 and would like to say thank you again to those who made this all possible.

I am very much looking forward to continuing the conversations which were started at CSW62. Today looks like a great day to change the world!



*Times Square!*



*The Flatiron*



*Central Park*



*The Brooklyn Bridge*



*Ground Zero Museum and Memorial*