

Report on CSW, 55th Session New York, 22 February – 4th March 2011

A personal view from Griselda Kenyon

CSW this year was less hectic and complicated than expected this year, since many who registered did not turn up and the queues to register were much shorter. However entrance to many meetings was very restricted until the second week when extra tickets for each meeting were abandoned.

The new head of UN Women, Michelle Bachelet, was very evident, giving a speech at the opening meeting, which was well received. She said that CSW helped her understand Member States priorities; and that UNW should focus on co-operation between the sexes, violence, women in peace and security, the economic empowerment of women, and that gender equity must be a national priority.

Bachelet also chaired a discussion on maternal mortality with the new chair of UNFPA, and officials from WHO, UNDP, The Global Fund on Aids, the World Bank and the Geneva Human Rights office. She managed it very well, letting each one speak for a short time and then calling for comments from the rest, before they spoke and with a reply from the speaker. This led to a much livelier discussion when the speakers relaxed and commented on each other and governments also had their say. It was a good session.

I didn't get into much of the discussion between states because of the ticket system, but some of the speeches I heard seemed to be going back on things which we thought had been informally accepted over the years, even if they weren't written. The Holy See speech rang alarm bells with me since they seemed to be much more rigid than previously and I gather there were problems in the informal discussions on the conclusions. I was told that wording that had been agreed since Beijing was now being questioned.

In the middle of CSW access to meetings was very restricted because the Security Council were discussing Libya and needed the space in the temporary building which was being used since the main building was being gutted for renovation. I got in by mistake one day to the old building and there didn't seem to be much left of the meeting space except the outside walls and lots of cables!

There was an entertaining panel on Sustainable Development which said that women were much likely to be green/to recycle/save etc but governments were not targeting women who needed to demonstrate their value systems. Women's poverty could not co-exist with a green future. There was an entertaining speech from a man who ran the Solar Electric Light Fund in Africa, who claimed that energy was not in the development goals, and that universal access to energy was essential for development. He showed lots of attractive slides showing solar powered schools, pumps, health clinics with electric medical record systems. (At this point my neighbour muttered to me that Haiti had a thriving solar panel theft industry!)

IFUW organised two panels for NGOs, one on education in conjunction with UNESCO on education with prestigious speakers from UNESCO, UNFPA and the Ambassador from Bangladesh which was interesting and a second one on encouraging into science and technology in projects run in conjunction with Governments in France and the UK.

Despite the restrictions the meetings I attended were interesting. However I had the feeling that this year, things were not moving forward very much and the lack of access to informal meetings and the difficulties of getting information from very busy delegates hampered understanding for NGOs of whether the process was going well or badly, prevented much contribution from NGOs and left it unclear whether this meeting was going to further the cause of women or merely stop it as best we could from going backwards.