

STATEMENT

By

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Excellencies and Distinguished Delegates

Last Sunday, over 1100 women and men, boys and girls representing NGOs, government and UN delegates gathered at the 14th street Salvation Army for the NGO Committee on the Status of Women Forum Consultation Day—our exciting beginning of CSW 56. The next day, I received a message from Natalia, one of our Young Professional leaders. She appreciated the idea that the CSW was a precious, democratic space that we have to safeguard. She thought that the speeches by Michelle Bachelet and Leymah Gbowee were amazing! She had tears in her eyes when Layla Alkhafaji from Iraq spoke of her imprisonment as a women's rights defender and when Nyaradzai Gumbonzvanda, born into an impoverished rural family in Kenya talked about the sacrifices her sister made so that she could attend school. Natalia said, "I was personally touched, empowered, and energized".

What are some of the messages we can share with you from our Forum? One of them is that the new generation of leaders is watching, learning, and ready to step in—and they find the CSW inspiring. This is reassuring in a time when—according to some skeptics-- the international women's movement is "quiet" and looking backwards to the Beijing Women's conference of 1995 instead of forwards.

Another important point is that rural women's and girls' economic empowerment will require more than technocratic solutions. At the heart of the problem is that—too often-- policy makers fail to understand the social and cultural context of rural women's economic needs. This is particularly evident when agricultural policies do not consider the wide diversity of rural women's needs according to ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, marital status, or levels of disability.

Mirna Cunningham Kain, Chair of the Indigenous People's Forum and this year's NGO CSW NY Woman of Distinction Awardee noted in her keynote address on Consultation Day that land is more than a commodity to indigenous women—it is also often a sacred, cultural reference for the community. Collective as well as individual human rights must be respected and honored, as well as the right to women's consent before so-called sustainable development policies are implemented.

Other speakers recognized that international instruments like CEDAW have helped to transform the legal landscape. Yet in many societies, gender inequality and discrimination are entrenched, systematically, into social and cultural institutions. Violence against women and girls—whether in conflict zones or in their own homes—is an economic issue because rural women and girls who experience violence may be immobilized by fear. A girl's first political decision could be her age of marriage. A woman's most critical economic decision may be the number of children she bears.

In many parts of the world, rural women are rising to the challenge in conflict and post-conflict situations. Leymah Gbowee, this year's Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, said in her address on Consultation Day "Rural women are organizing themselves. You just have to plant the seed of the idea and possibility". She told us that rural women in her region are the experts on disarmament because they know where guns are hidden. Bineta Diop, founder and Chair of the Board of Femmes Africa Solidarite, is putting into place -- at this very moment--early warning systems to avoid violence from erupting during this year's elections in Senegal. As she put it in her video address on Consultation Day, elections have increasingly become triggers for larger scale violence. She reported that rural women were at high risk, which is why village women were making extraordinary efforts to prevent the outbreak of new electoral conflicts.

The point is this: it is not enough to have good gender-budgeting indicators. Gender-friendly banking policies won't work unless we get at the heart of the issues. We have to understand more profoundly the inter-linkages between equality, development and peace and we have to make these a personal as well as public policy agenda.

In the next days, civil society will continue to debate and explore these issues. You are welcome to join the NGO CSW Forum in more than 300 parallel events on issues ranging from trafficking of girls and women, to the family, ageing, migration, intergenerational dialogue, health, and sustainable development. We also invite you to march with us on March 8, International Women's Day--down 2nd Avenue-- to celebrate "Global Women for Equality, Development and Peace". Sometimes we just have to let the world know that the international women's movement is alive and well. Thank you.