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The
Commission

on the

Status

of

Women

A Guide to CSW

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What is the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)?

CSW is a global, intergovernmental body that meets annually at the United Nations Headquarters in New York for two weeks around International Women's Day (8th March).

CSW evaluates the progress of UN member states in working toward achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, drawing on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA). The BPfA is a global policy document on gender equality, described as '*the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing women's rights*' by the organisation UN Women.

CSW is attended by representatives of states and hosted by the UN. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are invited to attend by Governments; as such this privilege is reliant upon a good working relationship between States and their NGOs.

Each year new reports and recommendations papers are produced outlining actions that are aimed at accelerating and progressing women's rights across the globe in social, political, civil, economic and educational fields. Most years this takes the form of an 'Agreed Document' that is developed by States; which draws attention to obstacles and aspirations that have been highlighted by Government discussions over the course of CSW. However, occasionally a 'Chair's Statement' is released instead. Additionally, resolutions might result from the exploration of key themes.

Each year at CSW three themes form the focus of discussions; these are drawn from the following categories: Priority, Review and Emerging issues.

What is the purpose of CSW?

CSW is instrumental in determining global standards on gender equality, through the creation of new or updated text, which calls for more urgent action on certain issues and identifies gaps in implementation. CSW ensures that gender equality is mainstreamed on the UN agenda in a concise and transparent way, to provide the basis for further concerted action. CSW provides NGOs, particularly women's organisations, with the opportunity to directly lobby governments, bring critical issues to attention, and network with organisations with similar goals, as well as representatives of governments. The intergovernmental nature of CSW allows for important documentation of the reality of women's lives and experiences throughout the world and creates opportunities for joint action on urgent issues.

How NGOs can influence CSW

NGOs are able to affect the outcome document and lobby governments on the 'zero draft' political declaration. Some NGOs will be invited to consult with governments directly, but there are also frequent opportunities to attend briefings and events with officials, present information, and ask questions. NGOs often lobby and influence governments on 'red lines', i.e. non negotiable areas and form caucuses around similar and overlapping interests to make this action more effective. NGOs have the option to create their own draft document, which can be used to apply pressure to governments to include specific wording and issues in the final declaration.

Brief history of CSW

1947: CSW first established, focused on formulating international standards to challenge discriminatory laws and raise awareness of global gender inequality. CSW was mandated to produce recommendations and reports promoting women's advancement in political, economic, civil, social and education fields, and quickly became involved in drafting many international conventions on gender equality and human rights. NGOs with consultative status at ECOSOC were invited to participate as observers at CSW.

1946-1972: To support the codification of the legal rights of women, CSW began to collate and analyse data from member states on the discrimination faced by women, both in law and practice. The information gathered provided a comprehensive insight into the status of women worldwide, which in turn became a basis for international legal instruments. UN membership was expanding rapidly, and CSW focused increasingly on women and development.

1975: International Women's Year was introduced to highlight women's global inequality, celebrate the developments that women had made in progressing gender equality goals, and recognise the contributions women had made to the strengthening of world peace.

1975-1985: First World Conference on Women in Mexico City, followed by the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, intended to bring legitimacy to the international women's movement, and push women's issues onto the global agenda.

1979: Legally binding Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was the first to define discrimination against women, and outlined internationally accepted principles on the rights of women.

1980: Second World Conference in Copenhagen focused on three areas of urgent concern: employment, health and education. Objectives included an updated Plan of Action and assessment of current implementation measures.

1985: Third World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the Decade for Women resulted in the adoption of Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women.

1986-1995: CSW began to meet annually, and women's issues were identified and mainstreamed as intersectional themes in other areas such as economic development and security. Violence against women, previously considered a private matter, was brought to the forefront of the international agenda and NGOs saw this as an important organising tool for the movement.

1995: Fourth World Conference on the Status of Women, leading to the Beijing Platform for Action, identified 12 specific critical areas to address and solutions considered essential to women's advancement, with specific emphasis on women's participation at all levels of decision making. BPfA is regarded as a significant milestone for advancing women's issues on the global agenda, and Commissions since have focused on consolidating strategies outlined in this document.

Important developments from CSW

- ✚ CSW contributed to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and succeeded in including new gender-sensitive language in the final bill, removing references like 'men' as a synonym for humanity from the final document.
- ✚ At Beijing 1995, NGOs successfully lobbied for the inclusion of the term 'girl child' to the BPfA, which meant that statistics about children had to be broken down according to gender. This was significant in identifying gendered differences in issues like access to education.
- ✚ At CSWs in 2003 and 2004, the word 'harmful' was added by NGOs to CSW language, in order to properly identify the negative implications of specific traditional practices and cultural norms, and increase accountability.
- ✚ In 2000, Resolution 1325 emerged from this CSW on 'Women, Peace and Security'

Structure of CSW

Meetings/briefings

There is an important meeting held the day before the first week by the NGO CSW Committee and there are two orientation meetings at the UN – one on each Monday. It is a good idea to attend these if this is your first time.

Every evening a Link Caucus is held at which one or two members from the other caucuses reports so that the organising committee can know what is going on across the board and advise and call speakers in the morning appropriately.

The morning meeting for NGOs is important. Representatives of governments come and speak, agencies speak and NGOs report. Any NGO wishing to address that meeting will find it helpful to speak to a committee member to arrange it beforehand.

Side events, panels & round tables

NGOs organise “side-events”, while agencies and governments hold round tables and panel discussions. Side events are usually located in the Church House across from the UN, while round tables and panels are held in the UN building itself, and this is where negotiated agreed conclusions are drawn up around the priority theme. NGOs will sometimes be invited to consult in these sessions. There is a calendar of events, and a diary for NGO activities, and most events are advertised on posters and daily calendars.

General discussion

General discussion is held between 3pm-6pm every day and is open to everybody.

Themes

Discussion at CSW is organised around a priority theme and a review theme, and agreed conclusions are drawn up from both to take forward. An emerging issue is also identified.

Recent themes:

2014:

Priority theme: Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls.

Review theme: Access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women’s equal access to full employment and decent work.

Emerging theme: Women’s access to productive resources.

2015:

CSW undertook a review of progress made in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 20 years after its adoption at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. The review (Beijing+20) also included the outcomes of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly, the first five-year assessment conducted after the adoption of the Platform for Action, which highlighted further actions and initiatives.

The session also addressed opportunities for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women in the post-2015 development agenda.

2016:

Priority theme: Women’s empowerment and its link to sustainable development.

Review theme: The elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls (agreed conclusions from the fifty-seventh session).

Who attends CSW? How do they participate?

NGOS:

NGOs accredited to ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council of the UN) may attend CSW, though how they can participate differs from governmental bodies. Broadly speaking, NGOs can use CSW to meet and lobby government delegations, work on a draft outcome document and network with other groups to establish caucuses over critical issues for more effective lobbying. NGOs attend side events organised by UN entities and most organise parallel events held outside of the UN. Preceding the CSW there are deadlines to submit written statements to be included in the official CSW documentation, usually several months before CSW, and another to make oral statements during general discussion at CSW, usually a month or two before. A limited number of NGOs with consultative status will also be able to make oral interventions during panel discussions at CSW and deliver speeches to the commission on behalf of caucuses or coalitions. Some NGOs can also attend public open meetings and are occasionally allowed informal meetings with governments to work on problems preventing progress with text.

Government representatives:

Government representatives participate at several levels of the CSW. The UK team is led by the most senior member of the gender section of the GEO (Government Equalities Office) and is largely comprised of civil servants along with some ministers. Governments work and negotiate with other member states to ensure commitments are made and aim to produce new text on gender equality measures which correspond with policy goals. UK NGOs can play a role in the official delegation but since the closure of WNC in 2010 they have not done so. The EU is represented by one voice, which always originates from the state of the EU presidency, and the European Women's Lobby usually sends a member for the EU official delegation.

UN entities:

UN entities, such as UN Women, are primarily responsible for the CSW. They organise expert groups, seminars and can contribute in intergovernmental meetings, liaise with the NGO Subcommittee and with NGOs generally.

Recognised Caucuses:

At the preparatory meeting for NGOs organised by the NGO CSW Committee, caucuses are established around themes and around regions which will meet every day or several times per week to discuss problems emerging during the intergovernmental sessions and to take their goals forward. These caucuses are recognised by the NGO Organising Committee at CSW and will be asked to report at the NGO general meeting which takes place at 9–9.45am every day. There are always Regional Caucuses, whilst others are organised around specific themes and issues.

Text:

Often governments find it useful if NGOs can prepare text which meets their goals. The European Commission is particularly appreciative of this as is the UK government. Caucuses often work on text. NGOs will work hard to influence whatever outcome document there is. During the first week sticking points will need lobbying but in the second week lobbying becomes crucial to get the most progressive text possible and to hold the line on vital issues for women already developed in earlier UN documents. Text is important—it contains the ideas to which governments have agreed.

How to navigate CSW

Registration and getting your UN grounds pass:

Upon arrival at the UN, each pre-registered NGO representative must register to get your grounds pass, details for which are provided in the confirmation letter sent out preceding CSW. Prepare for long queues and tight security, there are desks arranged alphabetically based on the first letter of your NGO. You must ensure you have your application for a grounds pass and your passport for ID. If you are new to the system, you will have your photograph taken and your badge printed immediately.

Get the handbook and map.

What to attend:

Events run in parallel, identify your preferences and plan your day. What issues do you want to lobby for? If you are part of a group, it is a good idea to liaise between members and spread yourselves between sessions.

1. Start day with briefing for UK NGOs
2. Workshop
3. Lunch
4. UN panel followed by general discussion
5. Workshop
6. Briefing at UK mission
7. Dinner, receptions

NAWO's Recommendations!

1. **Attend the Daily 9-10am general NGO meeting, or, for UK NGOs, the meeting in the Baha'i offices.** You gain valuable information and can pick up calendars and learn about latest changes. You can plan your day more effectively that way too.
2. **Try to go to at least some intergovernmental sessions.** It is easy to get caught up in lobbying, chatting, trying to find meetings, that you never attend a session at all. But be warned that governments can close or refuse admission to NGOs at any time.
3. **Decide what you are going to follow and lobby on that.** You can't do everything!
4. **The UK briefings are very interesting and worth while. They offer an opportunity to propose textual changes and papers are often distributed hot off the presses** Usually held in the UK UN Mission.
5. Take not only paper or get it there because that will be the right size for American machines (8.5"x11") but lots of **cards and literature** about your own NGO.
6. **Network like mad.** This is a great occasion for learning about NGOs and the problems of women from all over the world.
7. **Support other UK and European NGOs** by turning up to their events.