

10 March – 21 March 2014: 58th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) a Report

by Tsung Su

The 58th Session of the CSW convened in New York City from March 10th to the 21st, focusing on the priority theme of “Challenges and developments in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for Women and Girls”. MDGs, with an 8-point programme, was initiated by the UN in 2000 as a direct outgrowth of the Millennium Declaration.

Though the agenda of the MDGs targets many key issues of women’s rights, rights advocates from the onset view the programme as somewhat flawed as it fails to pinpoint the essential interconnectedness of all women’s rights issues. Poverty, lack of education, gender discrimination and lack of resources and services are all integral parts of certain overall social milieu which is conducive to such societal maladies. To see or single out individuals ills without looking at the totality is to see the trees without the forest. Issues such as Violence against Women in various forms was not even mentioned. (In my annual reports on CSW from 2000 to 2006, I either wrote copiously or mentioned the MDGs.) For 2015, the target year of MDGs, the priority theme of CSW will be a review of the progress of implementation of the BPFA of 1995, 20 years after the Beijing Declaration. BPFA (Beijing Platform for Action), with its declared 12 critical areas for action, is more comprehensive on the rights and well-being of women and girls.

Of the 58th Session, I will report briefly on the following areas : Women and Politics, Women and the Media and Violence against Women.

Women and politics

A side event organized by the Irish Government focused on the trials and problems women in politics face both in work and in life. The topics of the speakers : “Violence against Women in Politics”, “Stereotypes of Women in Politics”, “How Media portrays Women Politicians” highlight some of the problems. The antiquated notions that “women are too emotional, too indecisive, too weak, not smart enough and not to be taken seriously” still prevail in certain social mores. Thus, “Women are not naturally endowed to tackle heavy-duty jobs such as the ones in politics”. Thus, in certain regions, women are brain-washed or culturally conditioned to be lacking in self-confidence and ambition to run for political office.

Also women in “decision-making positions face numerous obstacles to being treated as equals in politics.” They often struggle with preconceived notions of how women should look, speak and behave. The media covering women politicians tend to stress the Woman rather than on the Politician.

A pamphlet entitled “Women in Parliament in 2013” gives some chilling facts about the dangers women politicians face in life and in work: In 2013, “Electoral violence includes threats, verbal intimidation, hate speech, physical assault, destruction of property, and other acts intended to influence or delay an election.”

Women candidates, politicians and voters are speaking out more on gender-based electoral and political violence. Internet websites are exploited by some perpetrators to intimidate or stop woman political aspirants. In 2013 the new woman Speaker of Italy’s lower house exposed the numerous emails of vile sexual nature she has received “threatening rape, sodomy, torture and murder”.

In Kenya, violence against women marred the 2007 election. A report entitled “Electoral Violence Targeting Women Aspirants in the 2013 General Election in Kenya” revealed that women candidates were targeted by violence during the party nomination stage (42.2%) and during the actual campaign (33.7%). In 2013 Honduras experienced a sharp rise in women’s homicide cases, this fact coupled with reports of fraud and violence leading up to the election, made a very threatening environment for women aspirants during the campaign .

To help prevent gender-based violence during elections, rights advocates have employed text messaging technology and mapping tools to spot warning signs and to identify and mitigate incidents of violence. UN Women has supported the application of the new methods in violence monitoring to help women candidates in Mali, Senegal and Sierra Leone.

Latin American countries have made strides in tackling the problem by passing laws to protect women in politics from violence. In 2012 Bolivia passed the Anti-Gender –Based Harassment and Violence in Politics Act “to defend and guarantee the enjoyment of political rights by female candidates, incumbents and elected.” In December 2013, Mexico adopted amendments to its electoral laws on violence against women to include cases of violence against women in politics and in the electoral process.

On the bright side, women across the globe have made significant progress in parliamentary politics. 2013 was a record year . The global average of women in parliaments is now at 21.8 percent , up from 20.3 percent in 2012. In 2013, quotas were used in 39 chambers holding elections in 30 countries . In total, women secured 3036 seats, accounting for 26.4 percent for all members elected or appointed to parliament in 49 countries. Of women speakers of parliament globally as of January of 2014, 40 women speakers out of 271 posts (14.2%) . Another record to note : Rwanda’s Chamber of Deputies in 2013 seated 63.8% women members.

Women and the Media

Panel discussions on women and the media in general have agreed on the following points: women globally are underrepresented in media houses, especially in decision-making positions; women covered in mass media are usually portrayed from male perspectives; male chauvinism in media work places is quite prevalent. The 2006 the South Africa Glass Ceiling report by Gender Link (GL) and the South Africa National Editor Forum (SANEF) has remained a definitive study of media women in South Africa. There are both positive and negative findings in this report. With an overall average of 41% of women in media in the region of 14 countries surveyed, Lesotho and South Africa lead the others, while Zimbabwe lags behind with a pitiful 13% of women in media.

Of the many findings of the report, I will list the following few: Men dominate in media workers in South Africa, especially in decision-making positions; drastic gaps in earnings and work conditions between the genders; in four countries (Mozambique, Malawi, DRC and Zimbabwe), media women are below the 1/3 mark; women are less than 1/4 at top management and hit the glass ceiling at senior management level; male sexist attitudes abound: male colleagues and bosses expect women in media "should know their places, stick to the easy beats and stay out of the boardroom." Sexual harassment remains a serious concern for many media women; most media houses do not have gender policies, even with the ones claiming to have (16% of the surveyed), no clear guidelines are articulated.

Given the above mentioned conditions, media coverage of women's issues tends to have the bias and coloration of the male perspectives. Studies by Gender Link (GL) and other groups on coverage of violence against women found the following facts: gender violence is often treated as minor as compared to other crimes; the voices of those affected are not heard; coverage is often insensitive with women portrayed as temptresses; there is a tendency to exonerate the perpetrators; most gender violence stories are written by men or court reporters.

GL and other rights advocates recommend the following to combat Gender bias in media: awareness raising through gender education in schools and workshops in workplaces; ensuring viable gender policies in media houses with monitoring mechanisms for implementation; sensitivity training for male media workers; leadership training for women in media etc.

Violence against Women

On the subject of VAW, I will report on three sub-matters: Human Trafficking, Rape as a Weapon and the Istanbul Convention.

Human Trafficking

There were discussions in both CSW panels and side events on the subject of human trafficking. The Council of Europe and the NGO Committee To Stop Trafficking In Persons are both actively committed to combat this malady. There are a few points to be noted before looking further into the subject :

- 1) human trafficking is closely intertwined with the sex industry
- 2) it is an activity of well-organized international criminal organizations
- 3) human trafficking constitutes gross human rights violations
- 4) the majority of victims are women and girls

“Human trafficking is modern-day slavery”, one panelist rightly put it. Across the globe there are 20 million persons being trafficked into various forms of servitude . Beside women and girls being forced into prostitution, trafficked persons also include men and boys . In addition to sexual exploitation, trafficking also involves forced labor, domestic servitude , forced marriage and forced begging. Cases abound of trafficked domestic servants being deprived of wages, food, outside contact, freedom of movement, being subjected to sexual abuse, beatings and harassment.

The Council of Europe, actively committed to combat human trafficking, adopted in 2005 the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. The Convention, ratified by 41 countries , entered into force in 2008. Recognizing gender-based discrimination and gender-based violence both as the root cause and the consequences of human trafficking, the Convention seeks guarantees of gender equality and gender-mainstreaming in the development, implementation and assessment of anti-trafficking policies. The Convention also sets up a monitoring mechanism known as the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) to evaluate policy compliance and effective implementation.

Rape as a Weapon

Rape of women and girls during both peace and war times constitutes an egregious violation of human rights and human dignity. Rape used as part of military strategies of subjugation and intimidation manifested itself many times in many armed conflicts, such as in the cases of Bosnia, Rwanda, the Congo and South Africa .

An ongoing case of systematic rape by the armed forces as weapon of war is the continuing atrocities committed against women and girls of the Kachin and Shan minorities by the Burma Army. Women and girls have been forced into portering, sexual slavery, gang-raped and killed by the Burmese troops since its armed deployment against the Kachin State in 2011. Despite declarations of promised reforms under the current Burma government, systematic sexual abuse of ethnic women is still used as a weapon of suppression of the minorities by the Burmese Army, according to documentation by the

Women's League of Burma and other NGO groups. Perpetrators are rarely or never punished.

The democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi lamented thus in 2011: "Rape is used in my country as a weapon against those who only want to live in peace, who only want to assert their basic human rights. It is used as a weapon by armed forces to intimidate the ethnic nationalities and to divide our country."

In May 2012, The International Campaign to Stop Rape and Gender Violence in Conflict was launched by the collective efforts of Nobel Peace Laureates, international advocacy organizations and grass-roots NGOs. The Campaign calls for three P's: to Prevent rape, to Protect the survivors and to Prosecute the perpetrators. Here are some grim facts on rape and sexual violence : 322 women were treated for sexual violence at a single hospital during Kenya's 2007 post-election violence; 48 women are raped every hour in the Democratic Republic of Congo; 200 internally displaced women reported sexual violence in one camp in Darfur in five weeks in 2006; there were 875 documented cases of sexual violence against women and girls in Burma in the period 1989-2006; 250 rapes were reported in the first 150 days after Haiti's 2010 earthquake; 500,000 of women reported rape in Colombia in the period 2001-2009.

The Istanbul Convention 2011

The Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention of 2011, is a comprehensive international treaty and blueprint for action to tackle the insidious problem of violence against women. It requires states parties to criminalize various forms of violence against women, including physical, sexual and psychological violence, stalking, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, forced abortion and forced sterilization. It defines the 'due diligence' legal standard as "the States' obligation to prevent, investigate, punish and provide reparation for acts of violence perpetrated by non-state actors." In the international context, the Convention states that it shall apply in both times of peace and times of armed conflict. It also stresses the social root causes for VAW and seeks to change attitudes, gender roles and stereotypes which tolerate violence against women. The Convention also sets up a watchdog mechanism known as GREVIO, composed of a group of independent experts, to monitor implementation of its provisions by states parties.