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CSW Marked by Political Uncertainties

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Opening of the 54th Commission on the Status of Women. Credit: Bomoon Lee/TerraViva

By Thalif Deen and Anna Shen

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 12 (IPS/TerraViva) – When a two-week meeting on gender empowerment concluded at U.N. headquarters Friday, there were several lingering questions crying out for answers.

Were there any commitments to protect the universality of women’s rights, including sexual and reproductive rights?

Was there any significant progress on the proposal to set up a separate U.N. agency – officially called a gender entity – for women?

And were there any indications of increased funding for gender-related issues, including resources to battle sexual violence?

The answers were mostly in the realm of political uncertainty, as the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) assessed the state of women’s rights, 15 years after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing approved a wide-ranging plan of action on gender empowerment.

Naisola Likimani of the pan-African Femnet, an advocacy organisation, said she was emotionally exhausted from two weeks of nonstop meetings.

However, she said, it was good to see that certain issues were now understood – such as human trafficking, which was no longer seen as an emerging issue. It was now part of a global space that required attention.

She was pleased the new gender entity had acquired broad support amongst governments, civil societies and U.N. agencies but expressed disappointment that the process seemed to be stalled.

“There is foot-dragging and nitpicking about politics. What is frustrating is that something so important for resourcing women’s rights is being treated like a political issue at the U.N.,” she said.

“That is very frustrating, especially as there have not been enough resources for gender issues,” she told TerraViva.

The speculation that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon would name a new under-secretary-general to head the proposed woman’s entity (one of the rumoured front runners being former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet) never came to pass.

An international coalition of over 300 non-governmental organisations (NGOs), mostly comprising women's rights activists, has been pursuing a global campaign for Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) in the U.N. system.

Charlotte Bunch, founding director of the Centre for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University and co-facilitator of the GEAR campaign, told TerraViva that decisions about gender architecture reform are part of the system-wide coherence process in the General Assembly.

"So the CSW is not really an arena for formal progress in terms of the resolution," she said. "However, we do feel there has been a lot of progress in terms of gaining more governmental support and attention to this issue during the CSW."

For example, she said, a significant number of countries from all regions spoke in support of the new architecture in their speeches.

The secretary-general himself called on governments to take action to create the entity without further delay, she pointed out.

Bunch said the NGO action - holding up a 'GEAR UP NOW!' sign in the balcony during his speech on International Women's Day on Mar. 3 - was greeted with enthusiastic applause from the audience and a wave from the U.N. chief.

Natalia Cardona of Social Watch, an international network comprising coalitions of civil society, said as far as her organisation was concerned, the CSW was a success because "it captured the dynamism of women's activism at the highest level."

"There is no other place where women activists can come together and discuss women's human rights situation from all over the world," she said.

However, the space in terms of government accountability and government accessibility has dwindled since 1995 when the world conference on women was able to make key advances in terms of women's rights as enshrined in the Beijing Platform for Action, Cardona told TerraViva.

There is a sense now in the women's movement that this 15th anniversary of the Beijing Conference was not much of an anniversary.

First, because of the administrative problems associated with hosting so many events, and the lack of physical space for women who came here with high hopes to access the U.N. and their governments.

The first blow for women at this CSW came in the form of the rather weak

negotiated outcome document released by governments.

This step, on the part of governments, sucked the energy of what women felt was a space to advance women's rights.

"Now, some may say that this weakening of CSW has been happening for years. However, this was an opportunity for governments to engage and renew their international commitments to women's rights, but instead they chose the path of avoidance, and women activists felt their needs had no place to be heard and be taken seriously," Candona added.

Judith Yewoenao, national women's chairperson for Ghana's Health Services Workers' Union, was optimistic: "This was not just a talk shop. In other words, we don't come and talk and go home and do nothing. We will go home and take measures on educating our women and enlightening them on women's issues."

"What I am saying is that most of the issues that came up here have to be taken up by governments, because most of them are policy statements and if governments are able to put down drastic measures to deal with this, we won't have to keep repeating the same messages over and over," Yewoenao told TerraViva.

She said women form the greater part of the population in most countries, and if women are well educated on human rights issues and women's issues, "then the countries will be a better place to live."

Dr. Hanifa Mezoui, a former senior U.N. official and a professor from Algeria, told TerraViva it has been 15 years since Beijing and there are many issues that remain to be explored.

"What does it take to make it better? It is with great despair that we still haven't met the goal. We still don't have women's empowerment," she said.

She said the CSW was very successful but there are huge political challenges ahead.

Bunch said the GEAR campaign's greatest concern now is not whether the gender entity will be created - but what will be created.

"We have been assured it will be done by the end of the current session of the General Assembly in September and in time for the summit on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)," she said.

But there are still a number of important details to be resolved, she added.

"We have noted repeatedly that in order for the entity to be effective - as a

driver for the U.N. system on women's rights and empowerment - it must have a strong country-level operation," Bunch said.

This requires that it be more than just a coordinating or advisory body and that it has the capacity to hold the U.N. system accountable for gender mainstreaming as well as to engage in its own programmatic work at all levels, Bunch declared.

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