

UPF International at the UN Commission on the Status of Women

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UPF International - After four years of COVID shutdown, the United Nations the Commission on the Status of Women, held from March 6 - 17, was once again bustling with thousands of women from all over the world. UPF representatives attended many of the hundreds of side events sponsored by countries and parallel events sponsored by UN-accredited NGOs. As usual, the range of issues, programs and opinions was wide and at times quite conflicted, with different foci related to women's and girls' situations. In fact, some of the CSW organizers' feminist viewpoints have received "significant pushback on fundamental issues." There was even a program titled, "Pushback on the Pushback."

The CSW 67 priority theme was "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls." The related review theme was "Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls." The following is an attempt to give a sense of my experience with two weeks of panel presentations while giving details from only a select few.

Education, income and health were common topics presenting many examples of the positive use of technology. Many events focused on the benefit of internet technology for women and girls, especially in rural areas in developing countries, by giving access to education, literacy programs, professional training, and even STEM advancement. The internet also provides general information such as news, practical technical information, or practices that increase agricultural efficiency. Women's entrepreneurship and small businesses are being fostered with mobile banking and access to virtual markets. Access to health care can also be improved with teleconferencing and virtual medical guidance. However, some participants pointed out that many areas do not have electricity, much less access to the internet, so the benefits are not reaching the most disadvantaged populations. In Afghanistan, in addition to meager internet connection, there is the overwhelming barrier of the Taliban's ban on the education of girls and women. One panelist pointed out that despite the benefits of internet education, if it replaces schools, girls do not receive the interpersonal benefit and empowerment of peer social cohesion.

Thus, education via the internet is a huge step forward and yet not a clear win-win for all.

Cultural values, negative social norms and stereotypes, violence against women, sexual rights, and sexual abuse were some of the issues discussed. Internet education raises concerns that the curriculum provided by the government or other organizations could promote, and in some countries, do promote, perspectives unwanted by parents and undermining fundamental cultural values. This raises alarms about parental rights and choice in their children's education, especially related to sexual behavior, identity, and religious values, as discussed in some sessions. Where many developed countries promote Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), other countries see its explicit sexual content and encouragement to "experiment" as sexualizing children without parents' consent or awareness. In some programs there was

a strong push for sexual rights of girls and women. There were occasional heated outbursts during some events which reflected more traditional values and parents' rights. Speakers in agreement with CSE called for more contraception and abortion services, using the terms "reproductive rights," while other countries saw their values trampled by this curriculum.

On one panel, the one male panelist commented: "What really liberates young women is birth control." This small statement may speak to the fulcrum of teetering conflicted issues at the CSW. Yes, certainly birth control has been a significant female liberator on many levels and attained a much-needed means of fertility control for women. But as birth control has radically transformed sexual behavior, parameters and assessment of consequences, you could say many men also have been "liberated" from responsibilities. Despite some positive results, one result of contraception has been the divorcing of sex from procreation, commitment, marriage and love.



Data was presented that repeatedly show single motherhood as the major factor increasing poverty of women and children and a rise in fatherlessness, especially for the most disadvantaged children. Several programs were presented on the internet's impact on the sexualization and abuse of girls and women as evidenced in the mega-industry of pornography which increasingly involves violence against women and sexual abuse of young children. Related sessions focused on the soaring rise of trafficking of children and young women as sex slaves. It would be hard to call these trends and industries as liberating females. Related to combating trafficking and rape, one organization introduced their small devices that women can conceal on their body in order to signal for help when being assaulted or abducted.

A few programs gave data on the alarming number of hours many girls spend on social media as related to an increased rate of depression and suicide. Social media, it was noted, creates a preoccupation with physical appearance, being "liked or not," looking "sexy" and "sexting," and heightens the risk of being bullied and, much worse, abducted. All of these certainly are deleterious to girls. Other presenters pointed out the benefit of internet connection of family or friends who are separated by physical distance while some stressed the importance of parents closely monitoring and communicating with their children about the real dangers of social media, especially predators.

Addressing women's equality and empowerment around the world reveals challenges of different values and viewpoints. How do we honor the UN's commitment to national sovereignty and yet question some traditional values which block women's opportunities? A few programs dealt with child marriage which clearly puts girls and women in a diminished and oppressed position, stifling their basic freedoms and educational and economic opportunities. Traditional taboos about speaking about sexual issues are problematic as there is no discussion about the risks or the positive meaning of sex, as well as no access to critical knowledge for the prevention of abuse or unwanted pregnancy. Programs that treat the discussion about sex with sensitivity to culture but also incorporate solid scientific information can be transformative. Some programs discussed the grave harm of the practice of mutilating female genitals (FGM) based on cultural beliefs. Medical records show that mutilating the genitals of girls often results in lifetime problems including pain, infection, complications during childbirth, decreased enjoyment of sex, the debilitation of fistula and even death. Best practices which have been the most effective in preventing the mutilation of genitals of youth break the silence of either cultural taboos or popular trends by engaging and educating the community, and parents, especially boys and men, so they become advocates for girls and for their own daughters.

The opportunity for representatives from developed countries to listen to representatives from developing countries about their living situation such as a basic lack of food, water and infrastructure, is a critical aspect of CSW. But the insight of these women is also invaluable. One Nigerian woman when discussing educational programs commented that there are a lot of educational programs only focused on girls. She warned, "Forgetting the boys is a big mistake! We will have a big problem if we let them fall behind." She also admonished some NGOs that come into rural areas with well-intended programs but convey little respect for or sensitivity to the community. She emphasized that success is only possible by listening to the parents' and community's needs and working with the community (women and men, girls and boys) so the people are integral to the goals, design and process in achieving the desired outcomes. Such bridges can be built that honor parental, community and national values while helping them achieve their desired advancement more effectively.

During several of the events, the term "girls and women in all their diversity" was often heard, referring to, for some, an undefinable sense of "female." During these programs, the focus was often on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). Using the term "reproductive health," they expressed the benefit and need of more contraception and abortion. In contrast, one international program, FEMM Health, assesses and teaches women about their personal hormonal functioning, menstrual cycle, and health with the help of the internet. This individualized medical assessment enables women to find solutions to any imbalances causing health and possible fertility problems. Furthermore, this information provides women with a natural means to take control of their fertility and avoid the risks and side effects of chemical contraception or contraceptive devices called "a menagerie of symptoms" by Archbishop Caccia, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, co-sponsor of the event. These medical facts provided by FEMM literally empower women to attain greater health and control of their bodies and fertility. As an important aspect of this approach, when this scientific understanding and method is shared with the woman's spouse or partner, fertility becomes the couple's shared responsibility in a way that honors women's unique biology and reproductive capacities. When men are aware of and respect a woman's biological makeup, the relationship deepens and sex has more meaning and satisfaction. This relationship better embodies a mutually respectful equality in complementarity and cooperation - a seminal model for human relationships and problem solving.

During this year's CSW, as in all years, an overflowing amount of viewpoints were expressed and sometimes hotly debated. It is vitally important that all women, and especially those less represented women from the poorest countries, share their day-to-day dilemmas, concerns and wisdom with women and men from other areas of the world. We need to listen to each other, everyone, build understanding of differences, and then find solutions based on universal human dignity and care for each other. The spectrum of challenges that women face is vast. It is impossible to imagine we can attain optimal flourishing of women as determinedly sought by CSW without technology, science, and not without men, but certainly not without respectful, understanding, global relationships.