WILPF at the #CSW62:
To Ensure the Rights of Rural Women in Conflict, Strengthen #MeaningfulParticipation and Integrate Gender Conflict Analysis in Action

In the last two weeks, WILPF activists from Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Japan, Kenya, Lebanon, Nigeria, Syria, and elsewhere joined more than 4,000 women peace activists and human rights defenders at the United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York for the sixty-second session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW62).

Activists came to strategise and mobilise action around the priority theme of challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls, including in conflict.

Now, that the CSW62 is over, it is time to assess the progress made, as well as identify challenges and key gaps moving forward.
WILPF Action at the CSW62

Before and during the Session, WILPF brought attention to the need to strengthen action for rural women and girls across the conflict spectrum. We called for the recognition of rural women and girl’s leadership specifically when identifying problems and creating solutions; the need for stricter arms regulations that risk gender-based violence in rural areas; and accountability for implementation of commitments on women’s rights and Women, Peace and Security.

A protest in support of Syrian women under siege in eastern Ghouta (Photo: WILPF)

Prior to the CSW62, WILPF delivered a statement on rural women in Nigeria facing militant violence around the Fulani herdsmen issue at the 25 January 2018 CSW62 Multi-
Stakeholder meeting in New York. This emphasised the importance of listening to the experience of local rural women and supporting their work in building prevention and response mechanisms capable of ensuring their safety and security.

During the Session, WILPF advocated behind the scenes and amplified the experiences and work of our partners and sections. Our partners brought attention to the impact of Israeli Occupation on women’s security and rights in Palestine, the situation of women under siege in Syria, the impact militants have on rural women in Nigeria around the Fulani herdsman issue, and historical challenges to inclusivity within social justice movement in the US. They shed light on women’s leadership for change. This included showing how women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and women peace activists are breaking the silence in male-dominated media platforms in Egypt and sharing calls to turn the Korean armistice agreement into a peace agreement through an inclusive peace process with women at the table.

WILPF supported feminist leadership development by providing youth training in advocacy for intersectional movement building with the WILPF US Student Practicum. We also engaged in workshops, events, trainings and strategic dialogues with activists and partners to mobilise support for the meaningful participation of women in conflict situations.

WILPF mobilised with coalitions, including the Women’s Rights Caucus and Women’s Major Group, to bring attention to shrinking civil society space and attacks on WHRDs and peace activists. In solidarity with our Syrian sisters, we protested Syrian atrocities in eastern Ghouta. In solidarity with sisters around the world, we raised the issue of partners who were denied visas and whose voices were therefore excluded and missing.

Where are We Now on Rural Women? Key #CSW62 Issues

Although the focus of the CSW62 was not on women in conflict situations, achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls is not possible without addressing rural women and girls across the conflict spectrum. CSW62 discussions did address the situation of rural women and girls in conflict. It also brought up key related issues, including around participation, gender norms, humanitarian action, corporate power, feminist finance, and WHRDs.

Rural Women in Conflict

Rural women in conflict situations face particular obstacles to realising their participation, protection and rights. For example, WILPF women peace leaders. Colombia have successfully pushed for the peace agreement to include important gender elements. However, women in Colombia continue to face violence due to the proliferation of arms and inadequate peace agreement implementation, especially in rural areas. At the CSW62, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), with the support of Norway, committed to launch a program that will support parliamentarians to reflect on WPS.
implementation to address ongoing UNSCR 1325 implementation gaps. Civil society also continues to hold governments accountable. In Georgia, civil society is pushing its third NAP. In Moldova, women’s groups helped draft a National Action Plan (NAP), representing a good example for civil society involvement.

Participation

Engaging women and women’s groups is a first step in deepening analysis and ensuring women’s meaningful participation and more effective response to root causes of conflict. This was raised in many thematic discussions at the CSW62, including around issues of peace and security, terrorism prevention and response, economy, society, community and other areas, including for young women. It also drove several initiatives, including the Elsie Initiative on Women in Peace Operations, Women’s Cohesion Space in Cameroon, African Women Leaders Initiative, feminist foreign policies in Canada and Sweden, and gender-budgeting in Uganda, Mexico and Costa Rica. As the UN Secretary-General Gutierrez stated at the Civil Society Townhall, “Without civil society pressure, I doubt we would be where we are today on gender equality.”

Gender Norms

Patriarchy in rural areas poses particular challenges to building equal partnerships and promoting political economies of justice and peace. At the CSW62, participants explored how cultures of machismo supported by the media can normalise discrimination and patriarchal violence. Women in rural areas may not have access to effective support from the state for their economic, social and cultural rights. This can increase their gendered risks. In Mali and South Sudan, one participant suggested that “the conflict is taking place over the bodies of adolescents girls”. Initiatives like the Spotlight Initiative on Eliminating Violence against Women, which will include a focus on femicide and violence impunity in Latin America, as well as engaging men and boys to support local women’s leadership on gender equality, can support transforming gender power towards equal partnerships and non-violence.

Humanitarian Action

Coordinating conflict prevention and response requires an integrated approach to humanitarian action that addresses the lives of grassroots women. At the CSW62, participants discussed how women’s access to rights and participation leads to better peacebuilding, recovery and development outcomes. Civil society introduced several projects, including in Jordan, to strengthen gender equitable development to respond to humanitarian crises. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action shared new guidelines to put gender equality at the core of humanitarian action, in response to ongoing challenges, including around the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence, including in refugee camps. Promoting gender equality across the development-humanitarian nexus in a
contextually appropriate way that is responsive to local women’s voices, including in rural areas, can strengthen action connecting short and long-term solutions for peace.

Participants of the event organised by the Women’s Centre for League Aid and Counseling on “The Gendered Impact of Israeli Occupation on Palestinian Women” (Photo: WILPF)

Corporate Power

Today, the state is often failing to uphold the social contract and ensure the rights of those most marginalised, including rural women. At the CSW62, participants addressed corporate power, including around corporate human rights abuses. An indigenous Guatemalan participant spoke about the lack of consent often associated with a takeover of land and resources from local communities. Similar experiences, including in El
Salvador, Brazil, the DRC, and elsewhere, demonstrated challenges to women’s rights to land, their security and human rights. In response, some countries have adopted laws to strengthen corporate accountability, including in Tanzania, where the New Land Act establishes equal rights for men and women. Activists called for governments to prevent the current shift that is moving the social contract to be between state and corporations, and keep it between citizen and state, where women, not just corporations and international financial institutions, have a say. With our allies, WILPF continues to call for a binding treaty on human rights for transnational corporations, including that makes a difference for rural women and girls.

Feminist Finance

We all now know that investing in gender equality means is an investment in peace, and investing in women’s organisations is an investment in preventing violence against women. At the CSW62, the UN Secretary-General introduced financing for gender equality as one of his priorities. However, discussions showed that funding gender equality and women’s movements remains a challenge. International donors are increasingly averse to funding small organisations that do not have proposal-writing training or the ability to produce financial reports, such as in the DRC. In Nigeria, international donors gathered $22 million in funds to improve the security of girls at school, but this money did not translate effectively. UN peace and security work also can easily not prioritise gender transformative work. For example, an initiative in Zambia, aimed to provide employment opportunities for women in fisheries, but ended up upholding caregiving roles, as men built the ponds and women made food for the men and fish.

However, even adding money on gender equality to existing pots of cash is not enough. CSW62 participants affirmed that there is more wealth in the world than ever before. Peace does not require more money -- it requires a fair (re)distribution of resources we already have. It requires avoiding situations where books are taxed but helicopters are not. It requires ensuring accountability for all budgets, including military budgets, through transparent information and reporting. Gender equality requires progressive systems that do not put the burdens on those most marginalised. It requires engaging in democratic budgeting that spends money in a way that works for everybody. And it requires overturning patriarchal systems and political economies of war to ones of gender justice, economic justice, and gender equitable and feminist peace.

Women Human Rights Defenders

Civil society and WHRDs were recognised at the CSW62 as independent and visionary leaders for gender equality and peace. Examples abound. In Uganda, civil society is developing mitigation mechanisms for gender-based violence. In the Koreas, women are leading a 2020 peace treaty campaign and a second DMZ-crossing on 24th of May. In Palestine, the Women’s Centre for League Aid and Counseling documents human rights violations committed against women and works to strengthen gender justice through its national and international advocacy. In Syria, Women Now for Development leads
programs for Syrian women to lead politically in rebuilding Syria. In Jordan, the Arab Women Organisation works to attain gender equality and increasing women’s involvement in decision-making.

At the same time, WHRDs are increasingly under attack. In Brazil, a WHRD and politician, Mariella Franco, was killed in an assassination. In Egypt, WHRDs and peace activists are targeted for their activism through the application of Law 173 on “NGO Foreign Funding”. In the Philippines, human rights defenders and peace activists are declared terrorists. At the CSW62, activists continued to be excluded due to restrictions on visas and travel, despite WILPF and other activists raising this as a challenge last year. To avoid hollow words, the international community must not only recognise WHRDs in their words, but take concrete action to protect, fund, and support the rights of WHRDs and prevent shrinking spaces and attacks so they can continue their important work.

2020 UN World Conference on Women?

Between 1975 and 1995, there were four World Conferences on Women, which pushed the agenda forward on women’s human rights. Since the Fourth World Conference in Beijing in 1995, there has been continued debate over when to hold a Fifth World conference. On one hand, there is clear need for increased action to realise women’s human rights. On the other hand, existing commitments are still not yet realised, and concerns have been raised that a new conference might actually reopen and move backward existing normative frameworks.

At the CSW62, Member States decided that at the 25th Anniversary of Beijing in 2020, there would be a review meeting on Beijing+25 in the form of a one-day high-level meeting of the General Assembly, on the margins of the general debate. WILPF joins WHRDs in the Women’s Rights Caucus and Women’s Major Group in calling for this to focus on accountability, rather than agenda-setting, and to ensure women’s meaningful participation in the process. This should also link with and build on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement, human rights agreements, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and agreements of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Arms Trade Treaty, among others. Twenty-five years after Beijing, we have a strong normative framework on women’s human rights. What we need is action.

The CSW 62 Outcome Document: Agreed Conclusions

At the end of CSW62, governments came to consensus on Agreed Conclusions, the first agreed language on the situation of rural women in CSW’s 62-year-long history. Although rural women were previously addressed in 2012, governments were unable to come to consensus. So, this was significant.

The CSW62 Agreed Conclusions recognised that “violence against all women and girls… is rooted in historical and structural inequality and unequal power relations between men and women” (para 25). It strongly addressed structural barriers to the empowerment of
rural women, including the lack of access to land rights, economic resources and justice, including for WHRDs. It welcomed the action by “feminist groups” as well as “women’s and community-based organisations” and WHRDs (para 42, 46) and called for action to integrate a gender perspective throughout decision-making (para 46 j, k, r, z, ff, ddd, kkk, rrr; 48). Overall, its structural approach demonstrated a significant achievement by women civil society advocates engaged in the negotiations and a strong analytical frame to address gendered systems of power.

WILPF advocated through coalitions to strengthen language on women's meaningful participation, disarmament and accountability in the text. This resulted in the successful inclusion of references to the impact of conflict on rural women and the affirmation of “the importance of their full, effective and meaningful participation, including by increasing their role in peace processes” and “the important engagement by men and boys as partners in promoting this participation” (para 34, see also para 30, 32, and 46 mmm). It also supported a direct recognition of the link between gender equality and sustainable
development and peaceful, just and inclusive societies (para 8). Unfortunately, however, gaps remained on UNSCR 1325 and disarmament.

Moving Forward

To address the situation of rural women worldwide moving forward, it is critical for the international community to recognise that the historical and ongoing marginalisation of rural and indigenous women is a part of militarised, patriarchal systems and commit to action on:

- Listening to the experience of local rural women and girls, supporting their analysis and working with them in building prevention and response mechanisms capable of ensuring their safety and security;
- Strengthening women-led civil society and leveraging feminist movements for sustainable and feminist peace;
- Promoting gender equal and non-violent communities through gender-inclusive services and programmes;
- Preventing arms transfers that contribute to sexual and gender-based violence, including in rural areas;
- Ensuring gender budgeting and adequate investment in social institutions;
- Challenging increasing corporate power that undermines women’s and increases many forms of violence;
- Treating rural women as full rights holders and ensuring accountability for women’s rights violations.

Read more about WILPF’s engagement at the CSW62 here>>

Participate in the debate! Share your thoughts!