

Equality for women means progress for all

Elahe Amani

The fifty eighth session of Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) took place in New York at the Headquarters of United Nations from 10-21 March 2014. Thousands of activists, human rights defenders, feminists and academics, along with the Representatives of Member States,^[1] UN entities and Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)-accredited non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from all regions of the world attended the session.^[2]

The fifty eighth session priority theme was 'Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls' and the review theme was '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' (the agreed conclusions^[3] from the fifty-fifth session). Each session also identified an emerging issue which for this year's session was 'Women's access to productive resources'.

The fifty eighth session agreed conclusion reached on Day 10 of the Commission on the Status of Women and it was great step forward.^[4] Two years ago during the fifty sixth sessions the delegates did not even adopt agreed conclusions on the priority theme and the chair of the Commission merely prepared a report reflecting the discussion.

The priority theme was focused on the challenges and achievements of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which were formulated and adopted after the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000, following the adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration.^[5] All 189 United Nations member states at the time (there are 193 currently) and at least 23 international organisations committed to help achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015^[6], the goals were:

- To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- To achieve universal primary education
- To promote gender equality and empowering women
- To reduce child mortality rates
- To improve maternal health
- To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
- To ensure environmental sustainability
- To develop a global partnership for development

While the Millennium Development Goals were highlighted by the UN and other global agencies as 'the most successful global anti-poverty push in history' (MDG Report 2013), looking at the challenges of achieving many of these goals through a gender sensitive lens highlights the deep rooted structural barriers to achieving these goals, particularly as they relate to gender equality and

the empowerment of women. The rise of religious extremism among some elements, along with the widening the gap between rich and poor in all industrial countries and also between the global north and global south are patterns that define the discourse of gender equality in the twenty first century.

The agreed conclusion confirms that almost 15 years after the MDGs were launched, no country has achieved equality for women and girls, and significant levels of inequality between women and men persist. A reflection on the shortcomings and gaps of the MDGs brought to light critical areas that should have been included in the language of the declaration in 2000: Violence against women and girls, which is a major barrier to women's human rights and dignity, early and forced marriage, women's unpaid work, the wage gap for equal work, women's employment in informal sectors of the economy, women's access and control over resources including but not limited to financial resources, micro credit, land, energy, women's unequal inheritance rights particularly in Muslim majority societies and women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights. Even in the goals that development benchmarks show some achievements against, these achievements are uneven in different regions and are also in some respects the outcome of trends already set prior to the UN Millennium Declaration.

During this session the role of the Holy See (The Vatican) came from the margins to the centre in some of the discussions. The Holy See demanded the removal of any language related to LGBTQ rights, sex workers and the language around sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) specifically related to sex education and abortion. Another contentious issue which has consistently been addressed by delegates from Iran (up to 2013) and the Vatican along with a few other conservative governments is in reference to the role of family. The divide is in reference to 'Family' in broad and diverse forms or highlighting the importance of the family in a more traditional, nuclear form which consists of a man, woman and their children.

Since the Beijing Conference gender equality advocates took the position that not recognising the diversity of family, not only reinforces gender roles and stereotypes, but also does not reflect the complexity of human societies in the twenty first century, such as single-parent families, grandparents raising their grandchildren in families, child and female-headed households and same-sex families. During this session another contentious issue was stronger language to urge governments to 'increase significantly resources for grassroots, national, regional and global women's organisations to promote and advance women's rights'. While the United Kingdom supported the stronger language on a 'significant increase', Russia, Caribbean states and the United States argued to replace this language with 'support' or 'provide', while the United States suggested replacing 'women's organisations' with 'civil society organisations'. The final language that was adopted was 'Increase resources and support for grass-roots, local, national, regional and global women's and civil society organizations to advance and promote gender equality, the empowerment of women and the human rights of women and girls.' So, efforts to water down the language were resisted.

On March 10th, Ms Shahindokht Mowlaverdi, Vice-President of the Islamic Republic of Iran for Women and Family Affairs read the statement of the IRI. She assured that "In addition to the significant achievements in the implementation of the MDGs, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has developed special programs for the remaining areas such as the elimination of violence against women, women's empowerment for equal access to resources and opportunities

and enhancing the political participation of women. In this regard, the bill on 'Securing Women Against Violence' is in its final stages of approval."

One would hope that Iranian women can hold the government accountable for the above statement. However, the consistent record of misogyny and an objective evaluation of the policies over more than three decades of the Islamic Republic of Iran on the issue of gender equality remind us that we should not raise our hopes that the government of President Rouhani can be successful in 'Securing Women Against Violence'. Iranian women experience many forms of violence against them in public and private spheres. Women not only experience violence at home, but also harassment in the streets and violence perpetuated by the state continues to violate the rights of Iranian women to safety and security. There are many discriminatory laws against women in Iran.^[7] Child marriage is on the rise and widespread violence against women is consistently ignored.^[8] Human rights advocates are being detained on the grounds of a 'threat to national security'.

Most recently, as of April 19th 2014, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated that "If we want our view with respect to the issue of women to be healthy, logical and precise, we have to empty our minds of this talk that Westerners say about women, [such as] about employment, about management, about gender equality. One of the biggest intellectual mistakes of the West about the issue of women is 'gender equality'," he continued. "Why should a job that is masculine be given to a woman? What pride is there in this for [a] woman to do a job that is masculine? I'm disappointed that sometimes women themselves show sensitivity on this issue, that 'What difference is there between us and men?'" He then concluded that "there is no difference," but that "the shapes are two shapes. One shape is for one job and one shape for another job."^[9]

Iran, which has a seat in the Commission on the Status of Women until 2015, specifically during the government of former President Ahmadinejad, alongside the Vatican and other conservative governments, acted as a major barrier to any progressive language on the advancement of women and gender equality. The voice of many Iranian women and human rights NGOs was not present at the NGO parallel events. However, participation of Iranian women activists from the diaspora and the occasional presence of Iranian women from Iran, has been an inspiring experience for those who attend NGO parallel events.

The election of repressive states to various UN bodies is a discourse that has been moved from the margins to the centre of the agenda. The politics of these elections is challenging the spirit of the UN and compromising the trust of global civil society in the United Nations. On April 23rd 2014, Iran was elected to five subcommittees of the UN Economic and Social Council.^[10] The five subcommittees are the Commissions on Population and Development, Science and Technology for Development, the Committee for Program Coordination and on Non-Governmental Organizations and the 45-nation Commission on the Status of Women.

Advocacy group UN Watch in an article stated that 'Despite the sharp condemnation of Iran's human rights record by UN chief Ban Ki-moon who recently reported how women in Iran are' subject to discrimination, entrenched both in law and in practice' and how 'women's rights activists continue to face arrest and persecution' yet the UN elected Iran to five subcommittees.^[11] Two of these seats in particular raised the concern of the global rights and gender equality community: the 45-nation Commission on the Status of Women, the world's top intergovernmental organisation dedicated to promoting women's rights and the 19-nation Committee on NGOs (non-government organisations), a position that enables the Islamic Republic of Iran to champion or silence human rights

organisations, depending on their views. The others members elected to the Committee of NGOs, a number of which also have repressive governments, were Burundi, Guinea, Mauritania, South Africa, Sudan, China, India, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Russia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Uruguay, Venezuela, Greece, Israel, Turkey and the United States. Hillel Neuer, executive director of UN Watch said 'Today is a black day for human rights,' and 'By empowering the perpetrators over the victims, the UN harms the cause of human rights, betrays its founding principles, and undermines its own credibility.' While the rights of many Iranian civil society activists are being violated for establishing NGOs in Iran and the work of NGOs in the area of women's rights and human rights are being interrupted by state and non-state actors, electing Iran to the Committee on NGOs is disheartening and indeed 'a black day for human rights'.^[12]

Many Iranian and human rights defenders can confidently echo the voice of the International Service for Human Rights that stated 'Civil society loses as repressive states win election'.^[13] Despite the instances of winning and losing in the battle of global civil society/ NGOs and the collective decisions of the member states in various committees and commissions of United Nations, the NGOs that in most part reflect the collective consciousness of the human race are hopeful and keep moving forward.

The language and wording of CSW documents, agreed conclusions and adopted resolutions are important as they provide a context for women human rights advocates and NGOs to move forward and a tool for consciousness raising and building a culture and language of human rights and women's rights. Even the limited presence of Iranian women among the thousands of other NGO delegates provides a forum for Iranian women to learn from the experiences of other women, build on each others' strength and learn outcomes, share and solidify the strategies to resist religious extremism and let the world know about the challenges that Iranian women are facing in striving for human rights and dignity.

In a statement to the commission, Mlambo-Ngcuka, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and the Executive Director of UN Women, reminded us about the political will of governments if we were to expect progress in gender equality. She said: "The safety, human rights and empowerment of women are pivotal in the post-2015 debate. UN Women is encouraged by the call of a large number of member states for a stand-alone sustainable development goal that addresses these issues. This will require political will, backed up by commensurate resources. As the commission rightly points out, funding in support of gender equality and women's empowerment remains inadequate. Investments in women and girls will have to be significantly stepped up. As member states underline, this will have a multiplier effect on sustained economic growth."^[14]

"We know that equality for women means progress for all. Through the development of a comprehensive roadmap for the future, we have the opportunity to realize this premise and promise. The 58th session of the Commission on the Status of Women has given important impetus to making equality between men and women a reality."^[15] Let us remember the inspiring words of Arundhati Roy who once said "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

^[1] See <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/member-states>.

^[2] UN Women, NGO Participation, March 2014, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/ngo-participation>

^[3] See <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/outcomes#55>.

- ^[4] UN, Commission on the Status of Women 58, March 2014, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw58-2014#sthash.DVJMtayx.dpuf>. See also http://storify.com/un_women/csw58-highlights-day-10
- ^[5] UN, 55/2. United Nations Millennium Declaration, September 2000, <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>
- ^[6] UN, Millennium Development Goals, September 2000, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>
- ^[7] For a detailed analysis of implementing women's rights in Iran, please see article by Fatemeh Haghighatjou in the inaugural edition of Iran Human Rights Review available on-line at: http://www.ihr.org/wp-content/uploads/ihr/articles/2010/10/334_challenges-of-implementing-womens-rights-in-iran.pdf
- ^[8] Justice For Iran, Early and Forced Marriages in the Islamic Republic of Iran, OHCHR, December 2013, <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/ForcedMarriage/NGO/JusticeForIran.pdf>
- ^[9] Ayatollah Khamenei, Ayatollah Khamenei's Speech in a meeting with outstanding women, Youtube, April 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzI_A_60gQ0
- ^[10] UN, Economic and Social Council, Opening Coordination, Management Meetings, April 2014, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2014/ecosoc6610.doc.htm>
- ^[11] UN Watch, Iran sweeps coveted UN rights posts, March 2014, <http://blog.unwatch.org/index.php/2014/03/18/report-of-the-secretary-general-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-march-2014/>
- ^[12] UN Watch, Iran sweeps coveted UN rights posts, April 2014, <http://www.unwatch.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=bdKKISNqEmG&b=1347173&ct=13866335¬oc=1>
- ^[13] International Service for Human Rights, Civil society loses as repressive States win election to regulate NGO access to UN, April 2014, <http://www.ishr.ch/news/civil-society-loses-repressive-states-win-election-regulate-ngo-access-un>
- ^[14] Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Statement by UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka on the outcome of the 58th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, UN Women, March 2014, <http://www.unwomen.org/co/news/stories/2014/3/executive-director-statement-on-csw58-outcome>
- ^[15] Ibid.

Source: Foreign Policy Centre

http://www.ihr.org/ihr/article/un-en_equality-for-women-means-progress-for-all