

## The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and women's rights

*The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) meets annually for ten days. Established in 1946 to promote women's political, economic, civil, social, and educational rights, since 1995 it has also been responsible for regularly reviewing the progress of the Beijing Platform for Action, and acting as a leading agent of change in mainstreaming a gender equality perspective in United Nations activities. Below are two views on the value of CSW by advocates who have regularly attended its sessions.*

Bene Madunagu is an internationally acclaimed advocate for women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. A co-founder of Women in Nigeria and of the Girls' Power Initiative, in 2004, she became the general coordinator of DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), a network of women scholars and activists from the South who are committed to working for economic justice, gender justice, and democracy.



*Bene Madunagu*

Bene says: 'I have been attending CSW sessions consistently since the 1990s. One of the skills women have acquired over the years is to seize every opportunity that exists to make our voices heard and

women's issues visible. CSW is especially useful because it involves UN member country delegates comprising of high-level policy makers. For some activists, who do not usually have the opportunity to negotiate at country and regional levels with their leaders, CSW provides a safe space for such dialogue. Experienced activists can support those less experienced from their own and other countries, providing helpful information on best practices as discussions are undertaken with their delegations. Usually these opportunities open the way for continued alliance building between feminist advocates and activists, as well as continued dialogue and advocacy follow-up activities back home.'

'It is a concern that this important space is shrinking fast, as interventions and representations by activists are being impeded by some governments. This has been the case in recent years, as some governments who have great influence on the proceedings at the CSW have become extremely conservative.'

'The CSW is a useful institution for monitoring the implementation of the

Beijing Platform for Action. This has yielded some tangible outcomes. A good number of governments shifted positions on their stance on sexual health and rights, as is evident in statements that they made at the 2005 session of CSW (for more information, visit the CSW website at [www.un.org/women-watch/daw/csw/index.html](http://www.un.org/women-watch/daw/csw/index.html)). However, most of the success can be accredited to the steadfastness and skills of feminist advocates and activists. The major weakness of the CSW is that it is not a treaty body. It has no power to sanction governments who fail in their obligation to women and girls to uphold commitments to which they are signatories.'

'CSW should assess gender mainstreaming, with a view to recapturing critical elements of gender analysis and move gender mainstreaming away from what it is now: a vehicle for the integration of gender into neo-liberal programmes. It should take more seriously the threat to women's sexual and reproductive rights posed by the neo-conservative backlash. The CSW also needs to strengthen its capacity by cultivating a more harmonised relationship with other relevant UN bodies such as the CEDAW Committee, DAW (the UN's Division for the Advancement of Women) and UNIFEM (United Nation's Development Fund for Women). CSW also needs to address, in a more constructive and sustained way, issues of the interlinkages between gender equality, race, religion, culture and tradition, particularly as these issues have such strong negative impacts on girls and women of the global south.'



*WEDO at Beijing +10 in 2005*

WEDO (Women's Environment and Development Organisation) is an international organisation that advocates for women's equality in global policy. Its goals include advancing women's equality in decision-making by pushing for a gender-balance at local, national and global levels, and challenging the current economic system to promote human rights, economic and social justice, gender equality, and poverty eradication. WEDO undertakes advocacy in key global forums such as the UN, and supports the efforts of women's organisations worldwide. June Zeitlin, Executive Director, WEDO and Doris Mpoumou, Gender and Governance Programme Coordinator, WEDO, say:

'The annual CSW meetings always draw record numbers of gender experts, women's advocates, and government representatives from around the world. It provides a regular intergovernmental forum at the global level for discussing women's empowerment and human rights.'

'At the ten-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2005, over 2000 representatives from international

women's groups, and ministers from 80 countries attended CSW and unequivocally reaffirmed the Platform. Drawing on the lessons of our campaign, 50/50: Get the Balance Right, WEDO stressed the importance not only of increasing the numbers of women in decision making positions, but also how they make a difference in advancing a women's rights agenda locally, nationally and internationally.'

'Many women's advocates—including WEDO — are increasingly frustrated by the CSW's and member states' emphasis on agreed conclusions, as opposed to meaningful dialogue. The language of the agreed conclusions has generally been weaker than that of the Beijing Platform for Action, reflecting the current global backlash faced by women's human rights.'

'In this context, CSW's future challenges must be considered, along with

the weakening of the United Nations and the under resourcing of UN gender architecture. At the same time the women's rights community should challenge pressures to consolidate or eliminate smaller agencies/commissions, so that these spaces at the United Nations are preserved. We must push for more dynamic and effective mechanisms that are not just about holding the line on gains achieved, but lead to further gains, and progress on implementation.

'The vitality and success of the CSW has largely rested on the strong support and participation of civil society, particularly women's organisations around the globe. Only together can we design a dynamic and effective process to monitor and facilitate the implementation of women's human rights. Our governments and the CSW need to hear from all of us on how best to do this.'

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