

CSW56 – Report of Associate Professor Helen Meekosha's Participation at CSW56



Associate Professor Helen Meekosha (WWDA)

Introduction

In late February 2012, WWDA member Associate Professor Helen Meekosha represented WWDA in New York at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) (see:

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/56sess.htm>).

Helen was there for a week, and as part of her representative work, Helen gave a presentation at the *High Level Panel on Rural Women and Girls with Disabilities*. WWDA was a co-sponsor of this Panel, and worked with our international colleagues for six months prior to the Panel to organise this highly successful event. The Panel was held on Tuesday 28 February 2012.

During Associate Professor's week in New York at CSW56, she sent back brief blog reports for WWDA members and others interested in the events of CSW56. These reports were posted to WWDA's electronic mailing list, and disseminated internationally, including to the International Network of Women With Disabilities (INWWD).

Sunday 26 February 2012

Sunday 26 February 2012 marked the beginning of the UN activities for Professor Meekosha with the NGO/CSW forum being held during the day. Unfortunately, the building where the forum was being held was not accessible, which seemed somewhat peculiar given that the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is one of the latest international human rights treaties to be developed! Due to the fact that the building was inaccessible, Professor Meekosha was unable to attend the NGO Forum.

However, there was the opportunity to meet and network with other NGO's and government representatives at the Australian dinner held on the Sunday night at the Beekman Tower Hotel. Professor

Meekosha met with representatives from the [Australian] National Rural Women's Coalition and Network (www.nrwcn.org.au), who provided an important network for continuing Professor Meekosha's and WWDA's much needed research into the situation for disabled women living rural, remote and regional communities. Professor Meekosha also had a positive discussion with Rebecca Pratt from Plan (www.plan.org.au) who is an important partner in further advocating on the issue of forced sterilisation of women and girls with disabilities, on an international and domestic level.



L-R: Rebecca Pratt (Plan) and Helen Meekosha (WWDA) at the Australian delegates' dinner

Monday 27 February 2012

The opening of the 56th session on the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was held in the General Assembly (GA) on Monday 27 February 2012. Passes to the opening were limited, with one pass allocated to each organisation. Professor Meekosha reported that it was such an amazing feeling and experience to be seated in the General Assembly of the United Nations. Regrettably however, Professor Meekosha and her support person found themselves seated as far away from the GA main stage as possible – simply because the only wheelchair accessible seat was on the top floor in the back row!



The General Assembly



Professor Meekosha in the General Assembly



Michelle Bachelet

There was a rousing speech from Michelle Bachelet, Under Secretary General and Executive Director, UN Women, who made specific mention of women with disabilities. The webcast of Ms Bachelet's speech is available at:

<http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/webcast/2012/02/56th-session-of-csw-ms-michelle-bachelet-executive-director-of-un-women-opening.html>

The other webcasts of opening statements from the opening session of CSW56 can be found at:

<http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/webcast/2012/02/56th-session-of-csw-opening-and-general-discussion-part-1-entire-video.html>

Professor Meekosha also attended the Australian briefing meeting that introduced a number of women from NGOs from the Asia-Pacific region who were also attending the CSW event. Professor Meekosha found it to be an extremely useful opportunity to hear about the key issues experienced by our significantly poorer neighbouring countries. For Professor Meekosha, and other women attending, it particularly highlighted the role of rich nations, including Australia, in supporting the dictatorship and military rule in countries in the global south, which result in the sexual assault, killing and maiming of civilian women.

Tuesday 28 February 2012

The *High Level Panel on Rural Women and Girls with Disabilities - Economic Empowerment and Political Participation* was held on the afternoon of Tuesday 28 February 2012. WWDA co-sponsored this Panel, and had worked with our international colleagues for the previous six months to organise it. The Australian Government also co-sponsored the Panel. Professor Meekosha was speaking on behalf of WWDA as a panellist. This was a significant event, as it was only the second time that a specific focus on disability had been discussed at any of the sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in the UN in all of its 56 years. The significance of this Panel for women with disabilities cannot be over-stated.



Professor Meekosha & Stephanie Ortovela presenting at the High Level Panel on Rural Women and Girls with Disabilities

On a broader advocacy level, it was also significant that this panel was given such a high profile, with the opportunity of two governments sponsoring it (Australia and Sweden), with a consequent flow on effect to influencing some of the draft conclusions to be put forward to the CSW Committee.



Ms Akiko Ito

Ms Akiko Ito, Chief of the Secretariat for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) within DESA (the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs), chaired the session. The Australian government representative, Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick, opened with a strong speech on violence against women, advocating for the prohibition of forced sterilisation of young women and girls with disabilities.



Ms Elizabeth Broderick

Professor Meekosha spoke strongly about the impact of rurality and colonisation of Australia's Indigenous people and the particular issues facing Indigenous women with disabilities in Australia. Akiko Ito requested a copy of Professor Meekosha's speech to be made available on the UN Enabled website (<http://www.un.org/disabilities>), which was done on Helen's return to Australia. Other panellists presentations were also made available on the site. WWDA also compiled a special report on the *High Level Panel on Rural Women and Girls with Disabilities* for Issue 2, 2012 of the WWDA Newsletter and this was made available on the WWDA website (<http://www.wwda.org.au/wwdanewsletter.htm>).



Professor Meekosha meets with Panel delegates

The *High Level Panel on Rural Women and Girls with Disabilities* event was encouragingly attended by many NGO constituents and government representatives from other countries. There were also, many women with disabilities who attended this side event, which was significant, given the lack of access and encouragement to attend other CSW sessions. The session instigated much discussion, particularly from

women from African countries, and resulted in further networking opportunities. Plans are now afoot for organising a parallel NGO event for CSW57 in 2013, which will focus on violence against women.



Panellists for the High Level Panel on Rural Women and Girls with Disabilities.

L to R: Stephanie Ortoleva (Women Enabled Founder/President); Lois Herman (Women's UN Report Network); Helen Meekosha (WWDA); Myra Kovary (International Network of Women with Disabilities); Carol Pollack (CRPD Secretariat) and Akiko Ito (Chief of the CRPD Secretariat).

Wednesday 29 February 2012

After Professor Meekosha's side event presentation on Tuesday 28 February, she was approached by Carol Pollack from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), to speak with Sonia Smallcombe. Sonia is an Aboriginal woman from the Northern Territory who is from the UN Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (<http://social.un.org/index/IndigenousPeoples.aspx>).



Sonia Smallcombe

This was an extremely useful meeting as Professor Meekosha was able to talk with Sonia about Aboriginal women with disabilities and discuss the best fora to raise issues specific to Aboriginal disabled woman (i.e. through the CSW, or through the Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues, which was held in May 2012). Sonia also provided Helen with good contacts in Australia to discuss these issues further. They also discussed the possibility of getting an Aboriginal disabled woman to attend the 2013 CSW event at the UN.

In the afternoon of 29 February, Professor Meekosha attended a side event sponsored by the Norwegian government about *“Equality between Women and Men – the Nordic Way Location”*. This was an interesting session given that the Nordic and Scandinavian countries are far more advanced in relation to policies and practices relating to gender equality.

The last event for Professor Meekosha on the 29 February was a welcome reception held by the Australian Permanent Mission to the United Nations. Delegates were formally welcomed by the Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Gary Quinlan and enjoyed delicious food, while mingling with a number of distinguished Australian guests (including the Sex Discrimination Commissioner) and NGO participants.



Mr Gary Quinlan

Thursday 1 March 2012

Thursday 1 March was the last day of UN activities for Professor Meekosha and she attended a Side Event sponsored by UNICEF, Plan, the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) and UN Women on *“Empowering Rural Girls: From Invisibility to Agency”*. This was a particularly powerful side event as there were 3 young adolescent girl delegates who were on the panel providing insight to the issues they face in their particular communities. These three young women were aged 15, 16 and 17 and came from rural areas of Pakistan, Malawai and Sierra Leone. They shared their stories relating to sexual assault, access to

education and health services and talked about the cultural and social norms inhibiting their ability to speak out and participate in their communities.

Side event attendees were also shown a video from Plan International who compiled video interviews with young girls and women from rural countries as part of a documentary they commissioned. One of the young girls featured in the documentary included an adolescent girl from Nepal with a disability who outlined her difficulties with access to education due to her disability and poverty. The Side Event also featured supporting commentary from Michelle Bachelet, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director, UN Women and Marta Santos Pais, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children. Professor Meekosha also met with Roseangela Berman-Bieler (Senior Advisor on Children with Disabilities) from UNICEF where she discussed UNICEF's agenda specific to children with disabilities.

At the end of her week at CSW56, Professor Meekosha gave the following assessment:

"It has been an incredible experience coming to the UN to represent WWDA and participate in another level of advocacy that we have not previously engaged in. It has been an eye-opener, both in terms of exposure to other international NGOs and to key government agencies, and also in terms of working through the international human rights process.

It has been a productive and effective time here in the UN. It has been significant that a specific focus on disability was given such a high profile in this year's CSW and there continues to be strong support for the inclusion of disability focused discussions in next year's CSW, both as a side event, but also in a parallel NGO event. There has been successful advocacy of WWDA's key campaign areas, having firstly been able to inform the international community of the issues relating to Australia, and also in garnering support from other international partners and NGOs of WWDA's agenda. WWDA's important work on forced sterilisation has been highlighted through the vocal support of the Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner, and has also resulted in violence against women with disabilities being raised as a key priority for the Australian government.

WWDA should be extremely proud of the work we have done so far. The high profile and support that we have established in the international community and within the Australian government in our time here will be crucial for campaigning in the months ahead.

Thank you for the opportunity to represent WWDA and all women with disabilities in this important event."