CSW70 Week #1 Report-back

Notes from Suzanne Hanchett, IWAC Co-President
March 2026

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1. Background



UN Secretary General Hosting a Town Hall for CSW69 participants last year

Every year, the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) meets in March for two weeks in New York City, and IWAC generally hosts a panel discussion in conjunction with that meeting. This year's meeting, its 70th, went on from March 9 to 19. There were more than 1000 sessions organized either as state-sponsored "side events" or as NGO/CSO-sponsored "parallel events" during the two-week period. I joined (both in-person and virtually) for the first week, starting with a preliminary Consultation Day online March 8. I attended from one to four sessions each day for five days, joining 14 altogether. I took notes as best I could, and I will be sharing some of my notes and thoughts over the next couple of weeks on the IWAC website.

The CSW[1] consists of 45 different countries (this year, 44, as one seat is vacant), each elected for a four-year term. Its stated goal is to promote gender equality and empower women globally.

CSW works toward this goal in the following ways[2]:

-Reviewing progress on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.
-Addressing emerging issues affecting women's rights and gender equality.
-Promoting the full participation of women in decision-making processes.
-Advocating for the elimination of discrimination and violence against women.
-Enhancing the role of women in sustainable development and climate action.
-Strengthening partnerships between governments, civil society, and the private sector for women's empowerment.

Every year CSW, supported by the UN Women office, identifies a primary theme and a review theme, around which discussions are to occur.[3] This year's primary theme was "Ensuring and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls;" and the review theme was "Women's full and effective participation and decision making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence." The review theme had been the principal focus of discussions at the 65th CSW meetings in 2021.

At the start of each annual meeting, CSW issues a declaration summarizing points of agreement on the two themes. This is called the "Agreed Conclusions," and it is vigorously discussed and debated before the annual meetings.[4] There have been a few years when CSW member states could not agree on the statement's wording and did not issue any. This 2026 year was the first time in 70 years when the statement was *not* produced as a consensus document; rather, it was voted on at the insistence of the U.S. This shift presumably leaves any opposing state or states a future opening to argue that they did not agree to it. Thirty-seven countries voted for it, one (the U.S.) against, and six abstained.

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[1] CSW is a commission of the UN's Economic and Social Council.

[2] https://www.un.org/en/delegate/everything-you-need-know-about-csw

[3] https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/commission-on-the-status-of-women/csw70-2026

[4] This year's Agreed Conclusions can be found at: https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.6/2026/L.2

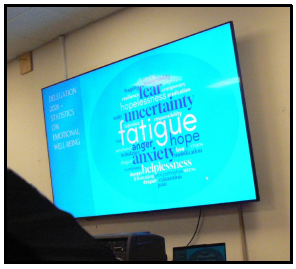
Before the the document was finally voted on, "The United States had tried to bring 8 amendments that would mould the otherwise-agreed document to be more in line with its own positions on a range of issues including abortion, gender, gender identity, and diversity, equity and inclusion. These eight amendments were defeated in a resounding vote of 26 to one, with 14 States abstaining."[5]

The Commission on the Status of Women strongly encourages civil society groups or organizations (CSOs), such as IWAC, to participate in deliberations, provide local and regional perspectives on women's issues, and to communicate with their own governmental representatives. There is an NGO-CSW office at the UN Church Center, which offers training kits on advocacy and other services to CSOs, as it promotes participatory democracy globally.



Severina Christmas Lemachokoti, a Masai woman from Kenya, was taking photos for the CSO Women for Women. I met her at a session on female genital cutting.

Most in-person "parallel sessions" during the March meetings take place in conference rooms in the Church Center building. Participating CSOs may present their own documents on this occasion. They bring together women from a great many different countries to share and compare experiences and discuss ways to deal with or solve their problems. According to Lopa Benerjee, Director of UN Women's Civil Society Division, the March meeting is the largest gathering of CSO's in the world.



Slide from a presentation on a 12 March session on Women Justice in Jeopardy

Confining myself to the "parallel" events this year, I managed to join 14 virtual and in-person meetings and hear the voices of women from more than 15 different nations or ethnic groups. The topics included make up quite a list! How to think and communicate about women's issues; what is "justice"?; combatting stereotypes; suporting positive "masculinities" in accord with feminist ideals; mobilization of the lowest castes in India, Europe, and Africa; rural women struggling for rights to land in Africa and Latin America; coping with horrific violence and trauma during times of war/conflict; forging a new international agreement affirming laboring women's rights in both informal and formal sectors; reforming treaty bodies; getting governments to actually implement programs to reflect the agreements they sign at the UN; and more.

This all went by very fast, and I couldn't understand every speaker's name or catch everything they said. Anyway, I am happy to sharing my notes, such as they are, with you.

[5]https://outrightinternational.org/press-release/member-states-reject-rollbacks-historic-vote-un-womens-commission

2. The Priority Discussion Theme: Justice

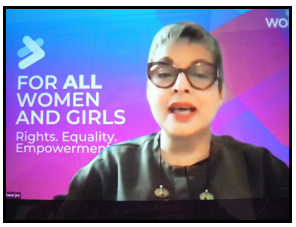
On March 8, NGO-CSW hosted a celebratory online Consultation Day, with speakers and the women's movement anthem, "Keep on Moving Forward."[6]





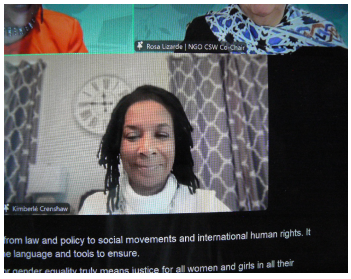
There was much discussion of the priority theme, "justice." Lopa Banerjee, the Director of UN Women's Civil Society Division, gave an illuminating talk. Justice, she said, is not a legal issue. It is a "reckoning." Justice is "where a society declares what matters, whose dignity counts, whose harm is recognized, whose voice is believed." It's important to recognize also "whose suffering is dismissed." She urged U.S.to use these CSW meetings to "sharpen our political focus," ensuring that laws fix the system instead of mirroring it.

The moderator, Lili Nkuzimana, said that "Justice can mean different things to different people," depending on their circumstances. Women in conflict zones need safety, for example. Another speaker observed that women and girls may not see their problems [such as domestic violence] as legal ones. Rather they tend to think of them as relationship problems and don't always turn to legal institutions to solve them. In a democracy, this person continued, there should be parity of participation, with diverse voices considered, as CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination) requires. Another speaker, from the International Labor Organization, argued that governments must move beyond "feel good" resolutions and figure out how to apply international agreements to their countries.



Lopa Banerjee

According to Patsili Toledo, a Spanish scholar and consultant to the UN, this and other international treaties could be useful tools, but they are still unknown in many regions. We must "keep interrogating what we mean by justice," she said, and whether we are getting it from our institutions. In Latin America, for example, "we can't rely entirely on the formal justice system." It is difficult to get convictions for serious crimes.Another speaker said, the state is just one option. We should create informal conflict resolution practices in communities too, and "decriminalize advocacy." Another said that women and girls may not see their problems as legal ones. Rather than turning to legal institutions, they think about relationship problems.


Kimberly Crenshaw

Thinking about these issues, I was interested to see a structural analysis provided by Tea Trumbic of the World Bank a couple of days later, in a session hosted by the U.S.Women's Caucus. She pointed out that for treaties and laws to be effective, there must be supportive institutional programs and effective enforcement. Only 67% of countries, however, have legal frameworks supporting women, ensuring safety, childcare, and entrepreneurship. Only 47% have supportive frameworks in place. And laws are only half enforced around the world, though 53% perceive that they do. Turn legal rights into lived realities by strengthening enforcement and

[6] A full recording of Consultation Day is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nE1jkqNkApo&t=8557s

investing in implementation systems, she recommended. There is some good news, she said. The "top enforcing" systems are found in Egypt, Madagascar, Kyrgyz Republic, Somalia, and another country I didn't catch the name of. Altogether, 112 reforms have been found across 68 economies.

On Consultation Day, NGO-CSW presented its Woman of the Year award to Professor Kimberly Crenshaw, who coined the term "intersectionality" about 40 years ago. This term has become an established part of the vocabulary in almost all discussions of human rights and pursuit of justice. It refers to the multiple, overlapping ways of experiencing inequality–such as class, caste, race, economic status, or gender. Professor Crenshaw pointed out that this concept has not only informed general discourse; it also has "made inequality legible to American judges." She concluded with the ironic observation that, as the U.S. is now seeing a "cataclysmic unraveling of norms of equality and democracy, ... we now see intersectional impunity in which class, patriarchy, racism, caste, and religion are adding up to a "blueprint for authoritarianism."

3. Structural Injustices, Gender Apartheid & FGM/C

The official first day of the CSW70 meetings was Monday, March 9. The first meeting I attended: "**Dismantling Systemic Barriers to Access the Right to Equitable and Just Participation in Local Governance, Decision Making in Public Life for Dalit, Roma, Quilombola & Palenque Women Belonging to Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent**." The session was devoted to **caste or caste-like systems**, the injustices faced by the lowest groups in those systems, and opportunities to challenge the "structural discrimination" that they face. A few other sessions echoed some of the same or related themes.



Four Panelists in the Session

The first meeting presented an amazing (to me) new alliance of the lowest caste groups in India, who call themselves Dalits, and other groups that face similar structural challenges in other regions: the Roma in Europe and some African groups. Representatives of four CSOs spoke: the Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (Africa, Queen Bisseng); the All India Dalit Women's Rights Forum (Abirami Jotheeswaram); the Asia Dalit Rights Forum (Beena Pallical); and the Global Forum, representing the Roma community in Europe (Simona Torotcoi).


Abirama and Suzanne at another meeting on March 13

The first speaker, Beena Pallical, observed that many countries have signed the international [treaty?] on civic and political rights, but they do not actually respect it. According to Abirami Jotheeswaran, it is necessary to confront the caste system itself, if the group formerly known as "untouchables" is ever to see justice. There are laws on the books in India that give hope: the system of reserving positions in education, government, and political councils, for example. But structural barriers have faced Dalit women when they come forward as

leaders. Despite good policies, Dalit women's rights are still very limited. She told a story about a Dalit woman council member who was in a position to dispense funds for local projects. Dominant caste members and former leaders criticized her decisions, and she was attacked; her right hand was injured. The national government, Abirami said, has to "move beyond symbolic support and give genuine institutional support."

Queen Bisseng spoke of groups within some tribes (in Ghana, Mauritania, and the [Oso?] in Nigeria) who are labeled as "inferior" because of their occupations and low economic status. Their members are never able to participate in public decision-making. She told me after the meeting of a Muslim community in [The Gambia] which considers leather-workers and those who dispose of dead animals to be "polluted," requiring them to worship in separate mosques. These and the other groups she represents are less educated and economically marginalized. Though many African countries have agreed to international policies, she said, their [constitutions?] do not encourage equality.

Simona Torotcoi, who is a Roma woman living in Romania, bitterly described her group's European "low caste" social standing as like that of Dalits in India. The Roma are discriminated against in housing, work and other domains; and they are excluded from all sorts of processes." "Politicians count our votes," she said, "but forcefully evict us" and are not genuinely interested in helping us. "Our invisibility," she said, "is an issue." She talked about efforts of Roma in Europe to enter political spaces and participate in public decision-making." They have been more successful at reaching local govern, and the ment positions than in higher level bodies. Some positive developments she mentioned are a training program for Roma women seeking political positions (I'm not sure where), and Roma members of parliament in Spain being able to pass anti-discrimination legislation.

This discussion did not cover next steps, so it's not clear what these three CSOs will do as the coalition becomes more active. But the fact that they organized this CSW70 event makes me want to follow what they do as a group in the future.

On March 10 I listened in on an online discussion about **Gender Apartheid,** a concept that has been used to think about systems of extreme separation between males and females in both Afghanistan and Iran under the fundamentalist regimes. This meeting focused on Afghanistan.

Two or three speakers talked about the situation of women living under Taliban rule. One, Hoda Khamosh, spoke only in Farsi, with the organizer (Elahe Amani, Chair, Women's Intercultural Network) translating for her. Introduced as a "leading human rights defender in Kabul," Hoda Khamosh and her family were attacked, her mother killed. Now she lives in Norway and is still trying to support Afghan women's struggle.

She works to get women prisoners released and moved to safe spaces. Many, she said, have committed suicide. There are 100 Afghan women, many/most age 15-26, in a program she has organized with international lawyers and funded. Some are taught German and provided with visas to work in Germany. She also organizes sessions online with women still in Afghanistan about how to survive gender apartheid. She recently organized a conference in Norway to raise general awareness of gender apartheid in Afghanistan. She urged us to understand that "Afghan women never cease working to affirm their rights," and "the international community should not recognize" the horrendous Taliban government."

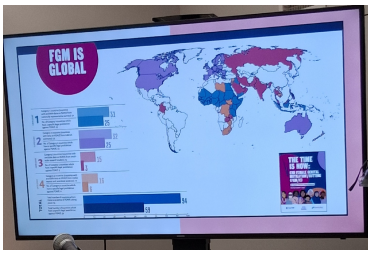
Another speaker, [Mursal Mubashira Sayas?], also said that the Afghan women's movement persists despite the difficulties women face. She was adamant that the Taliban government should not be "normalized," whatever promises it may make. Afghan women should be included in all international consultations, and everyone must understand that "Afghanistan is not the Taliban." When

asked about the reproductive health situation, she said that "the medical system has collapsed," and most people live below the poverty line. "Especially in remote areas, every day is worse than the day before." Women are not getting maternity care, and some are dying in childbirth. The majority of teenage girls are mothers controlled by abusive men.

A speaker named Latifa said that her CSO is offering online courses for Afghan girls. "We learned from the first experience with the Taliban," she said. Hoda Khamosh added that, in three regions classes are being offered in English under the label of religious education. These classes enhance women's language skills and support economic independence.



On the afternoon of March 9 I joined a discussion of female genital mutilation/cutting, commonly referred to as FGM/C. This topic has come up in many of the CSW parallel sessions during the past decade, and I was curious what this group had to say about it. The title referred to **Removing Racism in the Anti-FGM/C Movement**, and the widespread effort to eliminate the practice was strongly criticized as racist. Their argument is that the practice is more widespread than most people recognize, and that efforts to challenge in the white-led "anti-FGM/C movement" it are pervaded by unhelpful, negative stereotypes of African communities, many of whom use it as a rite of passage.



Some of the organizations represented in this panel are Sahiyo (sahiyo.org), Purposeful, and the Wallace Global Fund, a foundation.

One of the speakers, Dr. Ramatu Bangura (originally from Sierra Leone, with the CSO Purposeful), has worked with African immigrant women in the South Bronx, in New York City, all survivors of the procedure. Some white feminist organization, which she did not name, has attacked her group, going after board members and trying to "eradicate" the whole organization.

Women who have experienced FGM/C resent the word "mutilation" being used for the practice. She also said that it is becoming easier inside communities to talk critically about the practice nowadays than it was in her mother's generation. I commented later to her that this kind of inernal debate and discussion seemed likely the best path to changing what is clearly still an important cultural practice.



One important goal of this session was to argue for "survivor-led" change. In December 2025 one of the sponsoring organizations (I'm not sure which one) organized a conference at which survivors shared their experiences.

Near the end of this session I asked about an idea that had come up in previous CSW meetings, which was to devise alternative ways, new rites of passage, that could transition school girls to womanhood without genital cutting. In response to my question, one of the speakers (Dr. Leyla Hussein), who said that this practice had received much publicity and grant funding, but was actually harmful to girls, though she did not explain how it was harmful. She shouted that this was not a "cultural practice." Why should the girls have to go through

any rituals? Why can't they just become women on their own? She asked. After all, she argued, "white women don't have to prove that they are women." She felt it was insulting to regard victims of FGM/C as mere "story-tellers" rather than "experts."

I did not discuss the issue further with Dr. Hussein, but a couple of days later asked my new Masai friend, Severina (her picture is in Part 1), about it. She has a master's degree and works with Women for Women in the U.S. She said that there was some shame associated with FGM/C outside of Africa, so she did not speak with anyone about her experience as a survivor until she was in graduate school. She told me that the programs promoting alternative rites of passage were actually quite popular and successful in East Africa.

4. Economic Issues

On March 11 I attended a session on **Women's Land Rights**, which was hosted by an organization called the Land Coalition. The purpose of the meeting, according to the formal announcement, was to give voice to rural women, who play a critical role in defending land rights for their communities, yet face disproportionate threats and inadequate protection measures." Women leaders struggle to protect community lands, resist land grabs, and advocate for secure tenure. "Land defenders" deserve recognition and support. The panelists themselves discussed a number of complex legal, social, and economic issues involved in these struggles.

Two speakers represented indigenous communities, one was Rinda Yamashiro, a member of the Ryukyuan community in Okinawa, Japan. She is Secretary of the Network of Indigenous Women in Asia (NIWA) and an officer in the Association of the Indigenous Peoples in the Ryukyus (AIPR).

She mentioned that some government "development" schemes at times can push indigenous people off their lands[7], but climate change is their greatest threat. She argued that "false climate solutions," such as carbon capture, can "lead to new forms of loss for indigenous people." For her people, "invisibility" is a big problem. There is too little documentation of the violence, land grabbing, and environmental destruction going on. She thinks that "community monitoring" could provide valuable information and "move us beyond individual stories." She aims for "data sovereignty," because "when we gather our own information we are strengthening our movement and defending our rights."

The other indigenous woman on the panel was Guadelupe Martinez Perez, who spoke in Spanish about some Latin American indigenous people's land rights issues. She spoke about access to water being criminalized and some cases of violence against families. (As she only spoke in Spanish, I did not get much of what she first said.) She wanted us to recognize that indigenous women do things that protect biodiversity, such as preserving seeds – things that can lead to "powerful solutions." With translation from the chair, she said later in the session that the past, present, and future are intertwined in the world view of indigenous people. Land struggles go on today, building on indigenous women's knowledge of and relationship to land and air, "the things that make us healthy."

The two other panelists were from Africa. Frances Birungi, from Uganda, was representing a women and children's rights organization called UCOBAC.[8] And Ngone Ngom, from Senegal, is with a land-rights organization called CICODEV. Although there are some land-grabbing issues related to

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[7] A member of the audience from India commented that indigenous people (Adivasis) in her country also are often threatened by government "development" schemes.

[8] Uganda Community Based Association for Women and Children

economic corruption, these two speakers' principal concern was the separation between the formal legal system and the customary system. They both favor the formal legal systems, which grant lands to women. This, however, conflicts with the customary, "patriarchal" [presumably patrilineal] system of inheritance that transfers ownership only through the male line. Ngone Ngom said, "We're running a campaign, a national project," which does **"awareness-raising," informing women of their legal rights**. They are creating opportunities for community dialogue and also doing advocacy at the national level to "amplify women's voices" in the national narrative.

Frances Birungi's organization also is trying to "increase options" for women, but the formal justice system is difficult to use, and the "lower council courts" still incorporate aspects of customary law, which do not favor women gaining access to land. Though the formal system seems to be "stronger," she said, a man who does not succeed in the customary system may take time to go to the courts, "pay the bribes," and get what he wants.

Frances Birungi said there is a kind of **backlash** going on. Women are punished just because they are women. Gender-based violence and disappearances are a problem now. Both she and Ngome Ngom are involved in networks that promote collaboration between women's organizations. Ngome said that there are 68 organizations in the Senegal Rural Women's Network working on this issue and sharing information--more than 1000 people. A mayors' association is also involved. "Working together, we are stronger," she said.

On March 10, I joined a session titled **Mind the Gap: Achieving Gender Justice in the Workplace**, organized by the U.S. Women's Caucus (USWC). This organization, newly accredited by the UN's Economic and Social Council, is filling an important gap left by the present U.S. government's virtual abandonment of U.N. agreements and values. In preparation for the CSW meetings, USWC prepared short briefs on key issues.[9] These are being shared at the UN and with elected officials.

In Part 1, I discussed some of the insights about law and justice of Tea Trumbic, of the World Bank, who was the first speaker in this panel. She mentioned that a new law in Rwanda requiring men to add their wives' names to land titles was not actually increasing women's economic rights. The lesson she draws from this case is that "legal equality on paper is not enough." Testimony from the previously discussed session on land rights amplifies this message.

Elise Gould, of the Economic Policy Institute, talked about using data to implement change. She mentioned that in the past three decades little or no progress has been made in closing the gender wage gap, which is large at all levels (average around 20%), but greatest at the highest earning level. She mentioned key policies that would benefit women: namely, strong labor standards, raising the minimum wage, pay transparency, and enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. Staffing at the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has declined since the 1980s, so its capacity to enforce law is weak. As political will has declined over the past year, it is, of course, even weaker now than before.

Anita Thomas, part of the NGO Coalition to End Violence and Harassment in the World of Work, spoke about the movement to increase the number of states that ratify ILO Convention N. 190, which was formally adopted in 2019 but has been ratified (i.e., incorporated into national law by a national voting process) by only 54 countries. ILO Convention 190 is written to protect all workers – those in both the formal and informal sectors – from violence and harassment in the workplace,

[9]These papers are available at: https://www.uswomenscaucus.org/resources/

strengthen parental leave policies, and close the gender pay gap. If national ratification does not occur, a nation such as the U.S. could promote this convention at the state level. Her coalition acknowledges that ratification alone will not be enough, but it is a necessary beginning. She said it is important to confront private companies and challenge them: "Are you okay with violence and harassment in your workplace?"

ILO Convention 190, she said, meets a critical need to "translate legal protections into meaningful and actionable workplace safeguards." Ultimately, she continued, "safe workplaces are the foundation of gender equality ensuring that all workers thrive and succeed." Their contact email is: Ngocoalition.iloc190@gmail.com.

5. More Economic Issues, Mental Health, & Reframing Masculinites

On Friday, March 13, I joined two meetings, one online and one in-person. They were quite different, but one led into the other in an interesting way.

The first meeting, hosted by the International Sociological Association, was titled **Gender Justice: Sociological Studies**. The first presentation (by Marian Orjuela) described two years of ethnographic research in a densely populated and accessible region of the **Colombian Amazon**. Fifty CSOs, most led by **Afro-descendant women farmers**, have formed a coalition to support their political participation and work against gender-based violence. Networks of women and men share information. They also provide shelter for women and children who have been the targets of physical violence and intimidation by families who do not support their political engagement. Working with the Colombia Ministry of Justice, they have formed "creative learning spaces." They strive for **"eco-solidarity,"** which means an ecological type of social connectedness as well as respect for the environment. The CSO is developing legal proposals, including protective policies for women.

Liu Huimei, of Zhejiang University in China, discussed the problem of **sexual harassment of vulnerable women in clinical settings.** She has analyzed six well known cases, between 2012 and 2025, of male psychotherapists sexually abusing female patients in treatment for depression. Another study in China also found a high percentage of male therapists reporting that they had sex with clients. Depression, she said is more likely to affect women than men. The men, however, are not punished, even though they have violated the ethical code. The women need better legal support, and at a recent People's Congress, there was **a call for a new mental health law.**

Two presentations described studies on **women's economic issues.** One, by Natasha Quadlin of UCLA, discussed gender wage gaps, which are high at every level of education. **Justice, she argued, requires equal returns for equal work.** "Discriminatory pay setting" (paying more than background would indicate) is much more common for men, as they are perceived as leaders, stronger, etc. Sheila M. Katz and Livesey, both from the University of Houston, discussed global perspectives on the feminization of poverty. They got essays from very poor women around the globe (including Brazil, El Salvador, U.S., India, Philippines, Indonesia, and parts of Europe). These essays highlighted five well-known **dimensions underlying women's poverty status**: care giving responsibility for children and elders, women's weaker financial position relative to men's, inadequate access to health care, weaker educational background, and one other I didn't catch. The researchers also found that women's poverty does not get enough attention in governmental databases. Their conclusion was: "Globally, women's poverty needs to be counted. And **women's voices must be part of any change process**. Their message to decision-makers was something to the effect of, 'Don't impose your frames on us. Let us work with you to figure out what is and isn't needed'.

Professors Mairead Dunne and Barbara Crossuard, from the UK, presented a **critique of the ways the social development statistics are collected and presented**, arguing that too much international development discourse, at the UN and elsewhere, is based on an assumption of the "superiority of western man," despite the fact that there are plenty of everyday problems in the lives of the people who consider themselves more socially/economically advanced or "developed." **Development statistics**, including the widely used *Human Development Index*, they argue, are based on a "mis-recognition of gender," which flattens differences between sex, gender and sexuality, and reproduces a gender binary that has been formed without context. These statistics are "technologies of power that constrain how we can understand and address gender." They want to see a "new language to discuss gender" and "take newer understanding to our research." They did not have time to explain further what this new language might be, but they have many publications that surely do so.

The last speaker in the sociology panel was Sergey Konavalov, from **Kazakhstan**. He started out with an explanation that the Kazak people were mostly nomads before the 1917 Soviet revolution. (In 1920 Kazakhstan became part of the USSR.) Cultural institutions were based on the need to survive in the harsh environment: polygyny, clan-based protection, and the levirate[10]. Male dominance was/is the cultural norm.

But, "Since getting our freedom [from the USSR] in 1990, we are rebuilding," he said. A 2024 law required mandatory reporting of violence, which has led, of course, to an increase in the number of documented cases. Rather than directly punishing men who are violent against their wives and children, however, they are approaching the problem in a more humanitarian way. The situation is well described in his slide: **Why Criminalization Alone Does Not Eliminate Violence**

- *The criminalization of domestic violence did not produce an immediate effect. Despite the new legal norms, cases of extreme cruelty within families persist.*
- *In response the state developed around 60 legislative amendments in the areas of protection from violence, trafficking, and discrimination.*
- *The key idea was to recognize crimes committed against a family member as an "aggravating circumstance."*
- *The family is a space of trust, where a person becomes most vulnerable. Therefore,* ***the law must not only punish violence, but also prevent it.***
- *Society demands harsher measures, including the possible return of the death penalty. However, Kazakhstan has consciously chosen the path of humanization, recognizing that* ***justice is a multidimensional concept.***
- *The roots of family aggression lie deeper than law–in psychology, trauma, environment, language, and social narratives.*
- ***Without cultural transformation, criminal law remains a reaction rather than a solution.***

Kazakhstan is expected to create a new governmental position, Commissioner on Domestic Violence, sometime soon.

After watching the Sociology session online in Brooklyn, I rushed to the subway and went up to Manhattan to catch a very interesting discussion of **Reframing Masculinities: Shifting Power, Delivering Justice**. Unfortunately, I was 15 minutes late.

[10]A social/cultural requirement that a widow marry her deceased husband's brother.

The moderator of this panel, Jose Miguel Campi, is with Equimundo, an international NGO. The three other speakers were Hari Sharma, who works in the Men for Justice Program of the Azad Foundation in India; Pritha Chatterjee, who is Deputy Director of the organization, Breakthrough (www.inbreakthrough.org); and Laxman Belbase, of the MenEngage Alliance (a coalition of 1100 organizations), a social worker and gender justice advocate who has worked as an international development consultant.



Panelists (L to R): Hari Sharma, Pritha Chatterjee, Jose Miguel Campi, Laxman Belbase

The purpose of this discussion was to discuss a new understanding of **"positive masculinity,"** expanding a movement that reflects and works alongside the feminist or women's movement. Women and girls, panelists pointed out, have been encouraged to assert themselves, build leadership skills, and so on, for some time now. Men and boys, however, are stuck with unhelpful labels such as "toxic masculinity" in patriarchal systems that, they said, are not good for either children or adults. They too need to understand the concept of gender equality. Jose Miguel Campi described a group of young men who started a discussion saying things like, "I'm told a lot about what I should not do. But no one talks about what I should do."

He said that surveys find 40% of young men and boys have suicidal ideation or depression, feelings that no one cares about them. Young men are struggling, he continued later, we can all agree on that, but not on the reasons why. It's important to consider causes and solutions.

Laxman Belbase said that we need "narratives that are appealing," which make sense in specific contexts. Ideas can't just be cut and pasted from one place to another. The chair added the comment, that a narrative shift needs to start "with mind-sets and the stories that sustain them." Now we need a new script to build this positive masculinity.

Hari Sharma remarked that every state in India has its own kind of masculinity. West Bengal is different from Punjab and other regions. But everywhere, men feel pressured to show that they are "real men" by risk-taking and other actions.

The three principal speakers all described programs that work with men, boys and their family members. "We're bringing discussions of gender into men's spaces," said Laxman Belbase. "Ask what it means to them, listen to their stories. We don't need men as champions *á la* patriarchy. What we want from them is their taking responsibility. They need to feel uncomfortable, have those conversations." Pritha Chatterjee's NGO staff works with boys. Some of their stories have been posted on YouTube. Her organization also works with various groups of social media influencers on concepts such as equity and dignity.

Hari Sharma said, **We go into the manosphere,** talk with bus drivers about how they can support equity. For the past four or five years they also have been working with men, boys and women to **reframe what is customarily considered men's or women's work**. Boys start to do housework in a new "gender ecosystem." His foundation also is working to integrate new ideas into the Indian school curriculum. Men aren't born violent, he pointed out.

One audience member asked about intersectionality, how it relates to this work. Pritha Chatterjee said, There is no denying that in India gender intersects with caste, class and religion. They interviewed 80 young people about what would motivate them to intervene, or not intervene, in a situation of violence between others. A Muslim or a Dalit would not intervene because it would be too dangerous for them to do so.

Another question was about sexual and other violence against boys. Pritha Chatterjee said that corporal punishment is "rampant" in Indian schools, and it is inflicted most harshly on boys. Laxman Belbase said that when cases of sexual violence against men or boys are brought to the formal justice system, "the police have no idea what to do." (I assume he was referring to India.)

A third comment/question was: A growing number of men are turning toward a very extreme, patriarchal view of the so-called traditional family. What are you doing to disrupt this movement? Laxman Belbase said that some (unspecified) groups are weaponizing certain language. "We need to recapture the narrative." Even "decolonizing" has been weaponized in India now; even "gender apartheid" in Afghanistan." (I did not find this response easy to understand.)

Some general thoughts from this panel I found useful were:

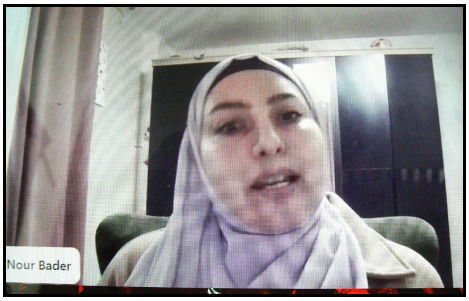
1. Thinking about access to justice, we must also think about fairness and dignity.
2. It is important that policies not reproduce stereotypes.
3. Do an intersectional analysis of patriarchy, and its impact on boys and men.
4. Systems of power put women and girls at the bottom. We must consider such "hierarchies of vulnerability."

6. Violence, War, & Trauma

Many panels dealt with violence in some form or another, but two had war and violent conflict as a central theme. On March 11 I listened in on a virtual panel discussion of **Women's Everyday Survival in War and Genocide**, hosted by the international NGO, DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era). The chair was Kumudini Samuel, DAWN's General Coordinator. Speakers were Bilquees Al-Abdali from **Yemen**, Nour Bader from **Gaza**, Fahima Hashim from **Sudan**, and Sarala Emmanuel from **Sri Lanka**.

Bilquees Al-Abdali, who leads a movement supporting micro-projects, spoke about struggling to make a living during war and displacement in **Yemen**. Women farmers, she said, continue to meet their daily responsibilities – carrying water, repairing things, arranging food – whatever the situation, not waiting for others to do things for them, performing their roles "with love." One woman sold the gold from her marriage to fund a small business she runs out of her home; and many others have used their dowries in similar ways. Getting permits to find work (I'm not sure what this means) is difficult but necessary for some. In the absence of formal protection systems, she continued, women need to be aware of their rights, so one of her priorities is raising awareness. The speaker is supporting **documentation of rights violations**, and also trying to make sure that women's voices are recognized in public discussions, even though their access to leadership positions is limited. It is very important, she said, that women are represented at decision-making levels.

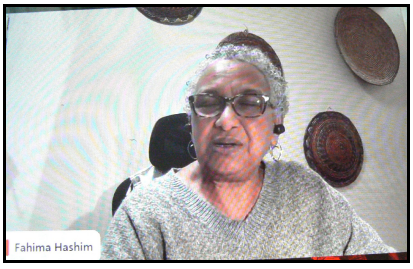
Nour Bader, who is a farmer and an academic, does research on surviving breast cancer. She spoke about the challenges facing **Palestinian women with cancer** diagnoses in the context of the devastating Israeli assault on Gaza. These women face three forms of violence: the war, displacement, and cancer.



Nour Bader

The hospital where they formerly could have gotten treatment has been destroyed, so they need to travel abroad to get care. Most patients, she said, are denied visas. But those who are authorized to travel face **the impossible dilemma of leaving their children behind or dying of the cancer.** One woman she interviewed did leave a child behind. This woman said that the cancer was not as frightening as the risks to her children. Another woman said, "I should have stayed with my children even if it led to my death." These are impossible choices. One cancer patient caring for four children waits in long lines for food to feed them. Finding food, she said, is so difficult that they only eat once every two days. Another talked about needing shoes to go out for food; she had fled with her children while bombs exploded nearby. One did not take her medication because she feared it would make her too sleepy to run away with her children when she needed to.

For these and other Gaza women, Nour Bader said, motherhood is about "creating life in the midst of destruction." **What does justice mean in the context of genocide?** she asked. It means ensuring some degree of protection: access to health care and food for mothers and children. "Mothers should not have to negotiate with death every day." It also means more than just recognizing suffering. It is also about "accountability."



Fahima Hashim

Fahima Hashim, who has been active in the women, peace, and security movement, spoke about the concerns of women during the ongoing **Sudan civil war**, which started in 2023. More than 15 million people, she said, have been forced to leave their homes and leave all their possessions behind, 90% of them from Sudan's capital, Khartoum. They had no idea where to go. Many families have gone to Chad, Uganda and other African countries; her family moved to Cairo. Both armies, the RSF and Sudan's, have used **rape** as a systematic tool forcing people to move.

Urban militias, the RSF, and Sudan government forces all rape women, she said. She knew of one case in which a woman, her teenage daughters and their grandmother all were raped. Girls have been kidnapped from their homes. The Sudan legal system does support women, she said. A law allowing marriage of girls age 10 and over has never been changed.

In Cairo she has met young women who were self-supporting in Sudan but are unable to find work in Egypt. These women, she said, have faced violence, even from their own families. (She did not say why family members attack them.) Darfur was under siege for [16?] months. Women, she said, have invited others into their houses, at least to talk about their terrifying experiences.

Online communication enables some to work from their homes, but working online can be dangerous as there is much **surveillance**. The RSF has been monitoring and attacking some civilians. This makes many unwilling to take advantage of online training opportunities. **Women do need training**, but they fear being attacked and/or arrested if they try to access it online.

What Sudanese women want, she said, is "not to be ignored." Laws need to be changed. Violators of their rights must be held accountable. Although women should participate in high level peace negotiation processes, none of the principal states – neither Saudi Arabia, nor the United Arab Emirates, nor the U.S.– have included women in these discussions.

The abrupt disappearance of USAID and other funding cuts have dealt a serious blow, limiting access to essential services and causing a 70% reduction in UN humanitarian aid.

Sarala Emmanuel spoke about a long-delayed **recovery process** from the trauma women experienced during the **Sri Lanka civil war**, which went on from 1983 to 2003. (I assume that she is talking about Tamil women.) When the war ended, she said, nearly 300,000 people were still confined [in concentration camps]. During the war, women's collectives contributed by organizing community funerals.

Reports of sexual violence against women are coming out only now; none of it has been documented. She compared their situation to that of the Japanese sexual slaves held in Korea during World War II. "We suffered for 12 years, she said, and the legal system failed us." Many women, however, do not want to speak publicly about this, because they don't want their children to know what happened to them.

They now are using companionship, poetry, and theater to heal. They have created "safe spaces" where "we can document our experiences," she said. We go on with daily life – preparing meals, doing birthday parties, and so on. This is our way of sharing personal stories, part of our journey to accountability. Some talk about sexual violence in war, and domestic violence too, through poetry and theater performancs. "We could not keep records during the war. Speaking and hearing truth is what we can do."

Sometimes women are seen as grieving wives or "victims," she explained. "But we prefer the image of anger and [fighting back]."

An related session, on March 12, was **Justice for Women: From Resistance to Action**, mostly focused on the human costs of war and conflict. This event was organized by a U.S. NGO based in North Carolina, WomenNC. There were presentations on **Iran** (by Beth Deghan of WomenNC), **Syria** (Mariam Jalabi, Syrian Women's Political Movement), **Ukraine** (Svitlan Salamatoya, International Institute of Cultural Affairs), and **South Sudan** (Diing Magot, a journalist). I missed the first presentation, on Iran, and most of the one on Syria too, so I have fewer notes on this session than on the one above.



Diing Magot, Svitlana Salamatova, and another speaker [from Iran?/Syria?]

Mariam Jalabi, the speaker on Syria, said that there is now an effective women's political movement there. Their goal is to promote discussion and negotiation. **"Problems," she said, "can't be solved by war and violence."** Everything has been destroyed, she said. Women's knowledge could make a valuable contribution to Syria's reconstruction, she said, but men are insensitive to women's concerns. Only men are engaged in peace talks, doing all the negotiation. Get women into the decision-making spaces, she said. Her NGO is working with Yemeni and Afghan women, and a few Palestinian women too, she said. "Wherever you are," she urged the audience, "do something." There was/is a very strong Iranian women's movement, which she applauds.



Young Ukranian women with their special flowers on

Svitlava Salamatova, from Ukraine, announced that her organization was formed ten years ago as a delegation to the CSW

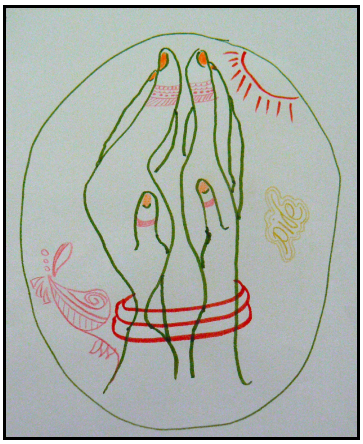
against the violent opposition of the Ukraine government. "We're here now" she said, "paying our own expenses." She showed a picture of Eleanor Roosevelt and spoke of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as their inspiration to activism. She spoke of the suffering of the Ukrainian people going on now, with thousands of women's husbands and sons serving as soldiers, some prisoners of war and being tortured. Lives have been stopped, she said, and "childhoods destroyed." This group has opened a school. They have designed their own black and white flag and a special flower is pinned to their jackets. She said that when they were going through the U.S. security on the previous day, the officers "asked us to remove our flowers." She also emphasized the need for more dialogue and said that "all of us, Syrians, Sudanese, all, should work together."

Diing Magot, from South Sudan, was arrested in August 2022 while reporting for Voice of America about a protest demonstration during a national crisis. She now lives in Washington DC and is doing some reporting from there. She spoke about the **difficulties facing women who wish to enter politics.** The South Sudan political system has historically been dominated by military men. Women are geatly hampered by stereotypes, that they are overly emotional beings, and only their looks matter. Female political candidates are often asked whether they can juggle their political responsibilities with motherhood and domestic duties. Even if they do get elected, it is assumed that they are serving as theA "inexpert delegates of influential men."

Women in journalism, such as herself, are not trusted as professionals, she said, and mostly fail to achieve editorial positions. And finding women mentors is difficult. She clearly was very discouraged about the whole situation.

The South Sudan government in 2022 violated the 2018 [agreement/law?] that 35% of elected officials should be women. This information was important news to me, because I had attended a previous CSW-NGO meeting of South Sudan women who were celebrating this agreement[11].

A third session, somewhat related to this theme, was on March 11, "**Healing Through Art: Feminist Approaches in Times of Backlash**," organized by Women for Women International. The purpose of this meeting was different from the others. It was all about expression and communication among us participants. The announcement explained: "In times of backlash against women human rights defenders, networks, and coalitions, safe spaces to connect, share strategies, and explore inclusive approaches to recovery are increasingly limited.



"This Art Therapy session offers a supportive environment for reflection, connection, and holistic healing. Participants will engage in practices such as mandala creation, storytelling, and letter writing, fostering self-expression, emotional processing, and resilience. Open to all, the session provides an opportunity to pause, reflect, and explore where we find ourselves individually and collectively, while engaging with feminist approaches to recovery that honour diverse experiences and support well-being."

We all were encouraged to make a drawing of something inside a circle and share it with another audience member, who could add to the drawing. I made a crude drawing of a pair of hands in the Indian greeting or gratitude expression,

[11] I attended that meeting because I have done some research on similar quotas for women elected to councils in India.

namaste, and showed it to a few people, who painted the nails and added some jewelry and other decorations. One woman I spoke with was a member of the American Jewish organization Hadassah. She is working hard to combat anti-semitism in the U.S., and her drawing was of a bright yellow star of David, which to her represented the joy and meaning that her Jewish identity provides to her.

7. Political Participation, Incarceration, Protest, Land, & Leadership in India, Brazil, the U.S., Turkey, and Iran

On March 12, our own organization, the International Women's Anthropology Conference (IWAC), hosted an online session --**Women in Justice and Political Systems: Grassroots Opportunities and Challenges** -- that addressed a diverse group of issues, some of which were also discussed in other NGO-CSW panels. One of these presentations, on Kurdish women in Turkey, was closely related to a March 9 panel I had joined on Iran, so this set of notes will cover these two sessions.

There were four pesenters in our IWAC panel: Elizabeth Chen (an IWAC Vice President); Janet Chernela (Prof. Emerita, University of Maryland); Annapurna Devi Pandey (Prof., University of California, Santa Cruz) with Ganesh Gaigoria (a fellow researcher of Odisha, India); Subhadra Channa (Prof. Emerita, University of Delhi); and Dilan Bozgan (a graduate student at Columbia University in Chile).

Elizabeth Chen's talk was titled, "Hidden in the Spotlight: Aporias of **Visibility and Justice for Immigrant Women in the U.S.**" By the end of 2025, she said, more than 70,000 people had been detained by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Unit (ICE) – men, women and children as young as two months, many from civic spaces, such as schools and stores. Children have been traumatized, families stranded without income-earning parents, families separated. The rights of undocumented immigrants are ignored, rendering them "invisible." And some have suffered multiple forms of abuse in detention, including sexual violence. These undocumented events, she said, have "amplified effects" on women and children. Case studies reveal how visibility functions unevenly, enabling redress for some while foreclosing it for others. She said there is a need to consider the role of western feminism in the maintenance of U.S. hegemony and imperialism, because feminism "both facilitates and obstructs justice for women who exist beyond its normative boundaries." (Further expanation is needed.)


Joenia Wapichana (Global Commons)

Janet Chernela's presentation, "**Dismantling Structures of Inequality Through Indigenous Women's Leadership**," highlighted the remarkable rise of Joênia Batista de Carvalho, an Indigenous woman from the Wapichana people of Roraima in the Brazilian Amazon, and the country's first Indigenous female lawyer. Born in 1973, Joênia (as she is known) witnessed the indigenous population of the state decline from 75% to 14%, as Brazil's military dictatorship resettled tens of thousands of landless white farmers "to integrate" the region into the "modern" nation. Indigenous inhabitants were made "invisible" by slogans such as "a land without people for people without land." New roads brought disease and deforestation. Designated by law as "semi-incapable," Indigenous people were rendered dependents of the state. With no legal recourse, they were compelled to find other, innovative means of defending their land.

Communities mobilized nonviolent strategies—termed "Shields"—to defend their villages against armed migrants and police. Women and children created barricades, called "Human Shields," to block invasions, while youths and elders produced maps of sacred areas and hunting grounds through "Paper Shields." After the military's departure and a new 1988 constitution, Joênia transformed the community responses to violence from ranchers and government into legal instruments for use in courts and Congress. In 2008, as Brazil's first Indigenous lawyer to argue before the Supreme Court, Joênia presented the ethnomaps and oral histories to demonstrate material evidence of continuous Indigenous occupation and "Original Rights." The Supreme Court upheld the continuous demarcation of 1.7 million hectares, and ordered the removal of all non-indigenous settlers. This landmark ruling set a legal precedent for Indigenous land rights in Brazil and elevated Joênia to national prominence. Her 2008 success paved the way for her election to Congress in 2018 and her appointment in 2023 as the President of FUNAI (the National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples).


Joenia Wapichana at a meeting

Annapurna Pandey and Ganesh Gaigoria also talked about an indigenous community -- Adivasis Odisha, India – protecting their lands against bauxite mining. The title of their talk was, **"Hills Are Our Life, Soul and Spirit**: Adivasi Women's Protest Against Bauxite Mining in the Sijimali Hills of Odisha."

Justified by the need to "modernize," this mineral, extracted from the Sijimali Hills of Odisha, is a significant part of the global aluminum production supply chain. Corporate interests are politically powerful as Odisha's reserves represent more than 50% of India's bauxite resources. And the state benefits greatly from mining, giving it priority over rivers, streams and nature. Natural resources are destroyed in the process, and climate change compounds the problem. The Adivasi people have vigorously protested against this. And **women have been leading the opposition movement.** For them, **the forest environment is not just an economic resource, the speakers said. It is an ancestor, literally "mother earth."** Their protests take many forms, including slogans, music and drama. Some people have been arrested, even killed. The present crisis demands "an alternative model," the speakers said, in which nature is respected.

Subhadra Channa addressed this year's CSW sub-theme, political participation, in her talk, "Getting a Voice: **Women as Grass-root Level Panchayat leaders in India**." The amendment of the Indian constitution in 1992 requiring participation of women and low caste people in decision-making councils (panchayats), has brought women into political spaces from which they were formerly excluded. But, she pointed out, whether or not women get actual power from this new law depends on local norms. In some areas and communities, efforts of the state to empower women and low caste citizens has been a struggle, as men of dominant castes can and do get the women of their families to serve "in name only" as proxies of the still-powerful men continuing to make important decisions. And debates still go on about how much leverage women can and should have as members of parliament at the state and national levels.

In the upper Himalayas and some other places, however, she has found women who definitely have and exercise political power. In one Himalayan region, for example, she found entire villages to be the province of women, because the men were mostly away working as sheep herders or cross-border traders. In a resettlement colony created by a dam project she found women to be "very much in control." Because the community was in a state of flux, she said, anyone with the right type of personality could take power. Lower caste women, she observed, tend to get the support of their own

people when they are elected as council members. Women in power, she reminded us, are not all protecting women's interests. Women in the R.S.S. (the right-wing, Hindutva group vigorously and sometimes violently supporting the current Indian government), for example, continually perpetuate Brahmanical patriarchy. Referring back to the theme of intersectionality, she said that "gender and caste cannot be separated."

Dilan Bozgan spoke about "**Kurdish Women's Political Participation and Grassroots Justice under Conditions of Exclusion**," with a focus on the Kurdish population in Turkey. (A colleague, Berivan Sarikaya, who was scheduled to talk about Kurdish activists in Turkish prisons, unfortunately was not able to join the panel.) The 30–40 million Kurds, she explained, are the largest population in the world lacking formal international recognition, spread across Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran.She briefly situated the historical context, noting that following the 1980 military coup in Turkey, Kurdish political movements were heavily repressed, with widespread arrests, torture and executions targeting Kurdish and leftist activists. As part of the broader Kurdish political movement, Kurdish women played a key role in developing what later became the widely recognized slogan "**Woman, Life, Freedom**" (*Jin, Jîyan, Azadî*), which has mobilized women's political action across different contexts.

She emphasized that Kurdish women's participation in institutional politics cannot be understood without looking at the long-term grassroots organizing that preceded it. Through neighborhood-level organizing (*mahalle çalışması*), party activism, and civil society work, women built collective infrastructures that enabled them to enter formal political arenas over time.

Drawing on ethnographic research with Kurdish women active in politics at different levels—from local municipalities to parliament—she showed how these women have developed political authority through collective mobilization, even while operating under conditions of exclusion. At the same time, she argued that Kurdish women's visibility internationally is shaped by a "striking duality": they are often represented either as fighters for universal values or as victims of state violence. Such representations, she suggested, risk obscuring the complexity of their political work and pressuring politically active women to "distance themselves from ordinary feminity." Women activists also face multiple forms of discrimination, she said. As one legislator she interviewed explained, Kurdish women confront class, ethnic, and gender inequalities, and even within their own political parties they are often expected to remain in supportive, "sacrificial" roles. Rather than expressing victimhood, Dilan Bozgan interpreted these reflections as forms of political diagnosis.

She concluded by emphasizing that women's political representation is not only about occupying institutional positions, but about the collective processes through which women build the capacity to transform those institutions from within.

Dilan Bozgan's presentation was closely related to a session I had joined on March 9, **Voices of Iranian Women: Pathways to Justice and Rights**, which included information about Kurds and other minority populations in Iran, and also embraced the "**Woman, Life, Freedom**" call for change.

The chair was Nazanin Afshin, and there were five speakers: Azadeh Afsahi (a psychotherapist), Azadeh Afsahi (a survivor & a psychologist), Saba Bandoui, Anahita Bassir-Nia (a psychologist and professor), Turkan Bozkurt (Azerbaijani advocate), and Shahidi Birjandian (a B'hai woman now living in Canada). An empty space and name-plate was kept at the table for Pouran Nazemin, a formerly imprisoned activist, who sent a short message.

Trauma, stress, and mental health were prominent themes in this session, along with calls for justice and women's human rights. Azadeh Afsahi is working with survivors of torture in Iran. She showed a video featuring a woman arrested during the January 2026 anti-government demonstrations.

Calling the women *halal*, police took seven or eight at a time to a separate room and raped them. "They do this to break your pride," she said, "but Iranian women are strong."

Raheleh Amiri presented her testimony in Farsi, with the chair translating to English. She said, "I see the world with only one eye." In the enormous demonstrations of 2022, "a bullet hit my eye as I joined women taking off their *hijabs*." That bullet, she said, targeted not just my eye, but also the "voices of Iranian women." Houses were raided, thousands killed or arrested, the bodies of women buried to hide the truth, she continued. For over 47 years "this government has held the people of Iran hostage." Amidst the pain, we chanted "Woman-Life-Freedom." Our grief will not break us.

She and another speaker, Anahita Bassir-Nia, both spoke of a symbolic act that I recalled a couple of days later when listening to Sarala Emmanuel from Sri Lanka (See part 6 of these notes). The Iranian women called it the **"dance of mourning mothers."** Rather than collapsing from grief and defeat, Raheleh Amiri said, "some dance on the graves of their children."

Raheleh Amiri has migrated to the U.S. The Chair said that such shootings are "not accidental." Troops/Police are instructed to target eyes (and some other part of the body too).

Dr Anahita Bassir-Nia offered some insights from social psychology on the "collective trauma" that Iranian women are experiencing. Their oppression, she argued, is framed too often as a "cultural issue" rather than as a violation of human rights. Women are <u>legally</u> forced to behave in certain ways, she said, <u>not culturally</u>. The "dance of mourning mothers" transforms grief into resilience. She expressed dismay that the international community has not truly supported Iranian women during the past four or five decades. "Neutrality does not protect human lives," she concluded.

The chair commented that in 2022 protesting Iranian women "felt so alone." Feminists elsewhere in the world did not come forward. She added later that, when injured women were taken to hospitals, "the Revolutionary Guard members were waiting there "to finish the job."

Saba Bandoui, Turkan Bozkurt and Dr. Shahidi-Birjandian all discussed **challenges facing minority populations in Iran**: Baluchis, Kurds, Azerbaijanis and B'hai religious communities. According to Saba Bandoui, minorities such as Kurds and Baluchis in Iran face many challenges in the current regime. The regions where Baluchis live have low literacy rates and high unemployment. They do not have the same citizenship documents that others have. Children [often?/never?] cannot access education. They feel socially isolated and humiliated, internalize ideas of inferiority; experience much psychological stress. Adult Baluchis and Kurds who challenge the regime are harassed by being required to report daily to government officials. Fuel carriers who must cross borders may be shot.

Similarly, Azerbaijani people in northwestern Iran are subjected to various forms of racial and class discrimination, according to Turkan Bozkurt. She works for an organization that is advocating for their rights. Azerbaijani children attend schools that use only the Persian (Farsi) language. The law allows very early marriage (age 15 for girls and 16 for boys) and has options for even younger children to marry. If girls marry young and leave school, they never become functionally literate in Persian. Sexual violence, she said, can be both a cause and a consequence of this disadvantage.

Dr. Shahidi-Birjandian, who now lives in Canada, is part of the B'hai community, a religious minority group in Iran. B'hai children, she said, cannot enroll in secondary education. And adults are not allowed to have more than a certain amount of money. They are "governed by different laws than others are." She said she has spent the past 15 years "documenting the worst atrocities that humans can inflict on others." Her close relatives have been arrested and tortured. The whole B'hai community is going through a "slow-drip genocide."

She compared the B'hais' situation to that of indigenous people, whose children forced into boarding schools and subjected to other culture-destroying assaults by the Canadian government during the 19th and early 20th centuries, with multi-generational effects[12]. "Let's learn from them," she said.

The woman not occupying the empty chair at this meeting table, Pouran Nazemi, sent a short video message. "I was 14 years old when I was first arrested," she said. "Since then my life has been cycling through arrests, imprisonment, and protest." After 64 days in prison "my body and spirit are taking time to survive." She seeks a future in which women's and girls' insecurity is defeated once and for all, a future in which women can fully participate and provide leadership in public life.

Iranian women aren't fighting just for themselves, the chair said, "they are fighting for all of us." There are unlimited painful stories. What we need is a form of "transitional justice" that will offer psycho-social support and feelings of security to people such as those we heard from and about today.

8. Pushing Back Against the Anti-feminist Backlash in Argentina & Elsewhere

This final part will discuss two more NGO-CSW sessions. One, on March 11, titled "Feminist Foreign Policies in Argentina and the Region," focused on the situation in Argentina, which has been experiencing a drastic reduction in all sorts of services, programs and legal protections for women since 2023, when Javier Milei became president. The second session, on March 12, "Justice in Jeopardy: Countering the Authoritarian and Anti-Gender Backlash," was more general, with presentations on Ghana, the Turkey and the Middle East, and Mexico.

The meeting on **Argentina** was mostly in Spanish, with brief or no translations into English. My Spanish was not up to the job of understanding most of it, so my notes are brief. There were eight speakers, but I caught the name of only one. Marita Percival, former Argentinian Ambassador to the U.N. and former head of the Feminist Foreign Policy, presented a new book compiling the experiences of "feminist foreign policies" in Argentina and other Latin American countries.

The Argentina government, like the U.S., is "failing to respect inernational commitments, such as the Beijing Platform for Action, and has dismantled programs that have benefitted women for decades.

Here's some background: Argentina went through the so-called Dirty War from 1976 to 1983. This was a period of government terrorism against political dissidents, more than 30,000 of whom were "disappeared." Anyone perceived as a socialist or communist was targeted as the government tried to totally silence any opposition. From 1977 onward women, calling themselves "Mothers of the Plaza" (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo*), gathered, protested and petitioned to get their children returned alive. Some of the mothers also were threatened, attacked or disappeared. Their movement continued after the war ended, to get justice for the disappeared, and it still exists.

The first speaker said that the present government, in addition to dismantling programs, is now promoting the **criminalization of victims of gender-based violence**. She claimed that almost half of all women are subjected to this, but few report it. The U.N. committee on CEDAW has been investigating violations of women's rights in Argentina. The next speaker said that state institutions are **firing staff** who were hired through programs to employ disabled and LGBTQ people. Even **Mothers of the Plaza have been attacked**, and people working on a Memory Site have been fired. Following her, a third speaker said that in Argentina,"We now have no rights."

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[12]The U.S. government did the same thing.

Another speaker, who works with victims of violence and migrant women subject to discrimination, said that the government provides no help with this work. She expressed frustration and disappointment that "the U.N. isn't doing what it should do to stop wars and ensure justice for all." Civil society, she said, should take more responsibility in nation states, and also in the U.N. There was a big march and demonstration for women's rights in Buenos Aires on March 8, International Women's Day, she said. "We think that the people ae way ahead of their governments."

The next speaker, who is in charge of women's affairs in the Argentinian state of Códoba, said that her province is rather conservative, but she has a good connection with Marita Perceval, and for the past 10 years at universities and in other spaces, they have been building support for women who are victims of violence. Economic limitations and political woes recently have reduced participation of women, however.

Two presentations dealt with **reproductive health** issues, including abortion rights and adolescent pregnancy. Until 2023 the elimination of "forced adolescent pregnancies" got support from multiple governments (I assume, by easily getting abortions). But now adolesce nt girls are not able to get access to contraception, and they are carrying pregnancies to term "so we must spend a lot of money taking care of these young, pregnant girls." The speaker following her is with an organization that campaigns for access to free and legal abortion.

The last speaker was Marita Perceval, who expressed outrage at the hypocrisy of government officials who say they do not have enough money to fund programs supporting women and protecting them against violence. She also spoke angrily about the failure of the U.S. government to pay its fair share of U.N. expenses, causing widespread hunger and many other serious problems globally.

The chair of the panel concluded with a warning: Everyone should remember, this is a dangerous time, a time of "war." **We need solidarity, and "we will win!**"

The March 12 panel on **Countering the Authoritarian and Anti-Gender Backlash,** was organized by OXFAM, Transparency International, the TAP Network (for Transparency, Accountability and Participation), and the Feminist Diplomacy Lab.



Speaker from Transparency International, Ghana

The first speaker, introduced as a "storyteller," was a woman from Ghana working at Transparency International. She said there are human rights and anti-corruption laws in Ghana, but still plenty of problems: accountability of institutions, corruption, and attacks on journalists who speak against the government's official narratives. Her organization is oorking to "remind politicians that we have the right to express our views."

An especially troubling issue now, she said, is sexual violence. Women are reluctant to go to court. She also spoke about "sexual corruption" cases, which she described as "**sextortion**."[13]

People working together, she said, is the only way to solve these problems.

[13]She did not explain, but I assume that she is talking about government officials or others demanding sexual favors as bribes.

The second speaker, Ezel Buse Sonmezocak, talked about the **Istanbul Convention** (actually the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence), which was agreed to by 45 countries between 2011 and 2019, and to which the European Union's accession was approved in 2023.[14] The Turkish government's 2021 withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention: Turkey was first and only state to withdraw. Since then, she said, the Turkish government has denunciated the agreement. There have been huge demonstrations protesting Turkey's withdrawal, resulting in people becoming aware of the Convention, and public support has increased. Her organization has published statements in Arabic, Kurdish, and English about this. She concluded with a Turkish saying,"You cannot stop a flowing river. You can change its course, but it will always find its way."

A speaker from **Mexico** said that her organization focuses on **transparency in the Mexican courts**. She said that the "distance between society and the justice system" has increased, and the justice system has lost its legitimacy in the public view. Certain reforms have been made: making sentences public, to increase trust that judgments were in compliance with rights laws or not; and limited terms for judges. These changes, however have not been enough. She said there is a need for dialogue between society and the justice system. People need to understand the debates inside the courts. Women, she said, suffer the consequences if this is not happening.

These case studies were followed by a general discussion of **how backlash happens and how to bring governments to account**. One speaker said that "these things aren't just happening out of the blue." And some "anti-gender" narratives have been effectively challenged and controlled. For example, in Spain access to social media will be restricted to protect minors from damage to their mental health. Those who promote hate speech in the digital sphere must be held accountable. Check the algorithms. "Bring your governments to account," she said.


Slide shown during this panel

Gina Romero, a Colombian national appointed as the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Right to Peaceful Assembly, spoke next. She discussed the problem of **surveillance** of women human rights defenders and other activists. (Diing Magot, of South Sudan, also spoke about surveillance on March 12. See notes in Part 6.) Some other ominous trends are characterization of of gender rights activists as "enemies of the family and traditional values" and "premeditated state violence, including sexual violence, against women protesters." The best ways to address these problems are to ensure rights to process and to give **funding priority** to this work. Self-care is very important, she said, CSO members caring for their own and each other's **mental health**.

The last speaker, who lives in Beirut, was not able to speak, but her talk was given by someone else. She also mentioned the importance of identifying essential funding sources. Creating spaces for knowledge exchange too. And documenting the ways that mobilization for rights happen. Alliances between regions and across sectors are also needed. "The transnational nature of the backlash means

[14]Information from Wikipedia

that movements need to share approaches to counter it." Anti-rights movements are better funded than those they are attacking. So "**long-term funding arrangements**" need to be put in place.

Concluding remarks were very helpful. Gender equality itself has become a political focus. Non-state actors have learned and continue to resist in environments where their rights are not respected. People at all levels of society are acting to sustain communities in difficult times.

Those defending human rights today face surveillance, violence and threats. Indigenous and minority groups are especially endangered, and all lack needed funding. Those facing the greatest risks have the least access to resources. The speaker represents a foundation, Mama Cash (mamacash.org), that raises and distributes funds. They take a participatory approach.

Feminist funds play a quiet but important role. We now need governments to match that level of support and courage. We are forming the background for a really democratic approach, she said.

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