

InterAction

FPA INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT - A UNIT WITHIN THE NEW ZEALAND FAMILY PLANNING ASSOCIATION

Pacific issues on the world stage

From 26 February until 9 March this year, Member States assembled at the UN Headquarters in New York for the 51st session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). This year's theme - the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child - was an important and relevant one for the Pacific, and representatives from the region worked hard to put Pacific issues on the world stage.



Photo: Belinda Brown

Pacific representatives of CSW highlighted the situation of girls in the Pacific, where discrimination and violence contribute to adverse outcomes including unwanted pregnancies, STIs (including HIV), low self-esteem and psychological damage.

As is common at the international level, the Pacific was underrepresented at CSW, one of the biggest hurdles being travel costs that can be taxing on an already small national budget. Tuvalu was the only Pacific delegation, while other Pacific governments were represented by their missions to the UN in New York. But while the Pacific group was small, they stimulated much discussion of Pacific issues and concerns. The New Zealand delegation, headed by Ministry of Women's Affairs Chief Executive Shenagh Gleisner, also gave voice to Pacific concerns, aided by the inclusion on the delegation of Diane Mara, president of Pacifica, a network of Pacific women's groups in New Zealand.

Pacific representation was further supported by two gender issues staff from the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and one from the Pacific Islands

Forum Secretariat (PIFS), through their preparation of briefs for all major sessions, country statements, and facilitation of weekly information sharing sessions for country delegations and their New York Missions. FPAID Manager Joanna Spratt and Communications Manager Karyn Amundsen also attended in the first week, working closely with the New Zealand delegation and mission to the UN, and their NGO colleagues, to advocate to ensure sexual and reproductive health and rights were appropriately and satisfactorily represented in the CSW's Agreed Conclusions, including ways in which the language of the document could be strengthened to reflect Pacific issues.

The importance of regional advocacy

Joanna says that for those able to attend meetings such as CSW - whether as

part of an official government delegation or independently as a representative of civil society - it is vital to have done the groundwork before the meeting by talking to others in their country or region who work with the issues, and learning from them in order to ensure their experience can be represented. Once at the meeting, there are excellent opportunities to gather new ideas, and to have face-to-face discussion with influential people from other countries, donor bodies and non-governmental

CSW at a glance

- The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is part of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and is dedicated exclusively to gender equality and the advancement of women.
- Set up in 1946, it is the principal global policy-making body for the advancement of women and achievement of gender equality. Every year, representatives of member states gather at the UN Headquarters in New York to evaluate progress on gender equality, identify challenges, set global standards and formulate concrete policies to promote gender equality and the advancement of women.
- The principal output of CSW is a set of Agreed Conclusions on the annual priority theme. This year's theme was the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child. The Agreed Conclusions contain an analysis of the theme and a set of recommendations to guide government action.
- Forty-five member states of the United Nations serve as members of the Commission at any one time. There is currently no Pacific representation.

groups, and this can be fed back to in-country networks.

It is important to remember that regional advocacy and networking are critical in ensuring Pacific issues are visible at international meetings, Joanna says, through networks such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) member associations in the Pacific, and the Pacific Parliamentary Assembly on Population and Development (PPAPD), which is coordinated by SPC and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

“Regional positions and statements agreed through these networks are an important advocacy tool at the international level.”

Pacific statements

During the CSW’s general debate, representatives of Pacific missions to the UN and Tuvalu made statements that specifically highlighted the situation of the girl-child in the Pacific.

Photo: SPC



Tuvalu Minister for Home Affairs, Hon Willy Telavi.

Speaking to around two hundred political peers on behalf of Pacific Islands Forum countries, Tuvalu’s Minister for Home Affairs, Hon Willy Telavi, highlighted factors putting girls at risk in the Pacific, including the use of custom, culture and tradition as

justifications for discriminatory and violent treatment; early and forced marriage, particularly in Melanesia; limited access to education; teenage pregnancy and the consequent impact on health and education; and social acceptance of violent punishment of children.

“As a consequence, the situation of the girl child in the Pacific is characterised by a growing incidence of girl children in child labour, higher health risks, including exposure to HIV, continued growing rates of teenage pregnancy, low self-esteem and psychological damage among girls,” Mr Telavi said.

In the Pacific, good initiatives to boost the status of girls were undertaken in partnership with regional, donor and civil society groups, he said. These included an in-depth study on violence against women and children in Samoa, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, the results of which would feed into policy across the region.

Mr Telavi noted that it was crucial to actively engage men and boys in efforts to reduce inequalities, including in the everyday life of the family.

Pacific side event

The role of men and boys in championing gender equality was also among hot topics at a side event organised by SPC and PIFS, in which a panel chaired by PNG’s Representative to the UN, Ambassador Robert Aisi, discussed the CSW theme as it relates to the Pacific. The need for Pacific governments to take concrete action to improve the status of women and girls, and the lives of Pacific women in New Zealand were also discussed.

The one-hour session aimed to raise

the profile of Pacific issues at CSW, and attracted an engaged and high-calibre crowd of about 30 people, including representatives of UN permanent missions of Fiji, PNG, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu and India, staff of civil society, and representatives from agencies like the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), and the UNFPA Office of the Pacific.

Panel speaker Linda Peterson, SPC’s Human Development Programme Manager, said CSW offered a valuable opportunity to share information on the Pacific on an international stage, while identifying new partners for progress. It also helped to raise Pacific issues as unique in themselves on the world stage.

“At this level, the Pacific tends to be lumped together with Asia, and that means Pacific issues are overshadowed by the size and seriousness of the problems in Asia.”

Translating words into action

In open discussion there was consensus that Pacific governments need to take responsibility for advancing gender equality, and be engaged, supportive and willing to take action.

Joanna agrees: “The CSW Agreed Conclusions provide a global political consensus on the action needed, and do address concerns relevant to the Pacific – like the lack of involvement of men and boys in respecting and promoting women and girls’ human rights. But that has to be translated into action, which needs regional organisations, NGOs and national governments to work together in a cohesive and coordinated way”.

Finding their voice – the new generation of advocates

Conscious of the need to ensure there is a strong “new generation” of advocates working at the UN to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), the US-based International Women’s Health Coalition (IWHC) convened a pre-CSW workshop which would be the basis for a new informal advocacy network, with an emphasis on emerging young advocates. FPAID Manager Joanna Spratt and Communications Manager Karyn Ammundsen participated in the workshop, and took the opportunity to find out what drives these new advocates to do what they do.

Sarah Rosenhek, *Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), Canada.*

Sarah, 27, is passionate about making change happen for women at both the local and international level. She joined AWID in 2005, attracted by the fact that it was a progressive women’s rights organisation, and somewhere where she could be challenged and feel committed to what she does.

“Social justice work, specifically in relation to improving women’s rights, can be discouraging and depressing at times, but I am driven by the support of my colleagues and strength and solidarity I feel in the movements when we see one another at meetings and events, and we share stories, strategies and successes.”

Prior to joining AWID, where she provides research and programme support, Sarah

worked for the National Council on Ethics in Human Research in Ottawa, Canada, an organisation working to advance the protection and well-being of human participants in research.

CSW51 was her first experience of UN advocacy work, and an opportunity to become well-versed in the inner workings of UN processes and gain a better sense and



From left: George Liendo, Rahal Saeed, Aleksandra Osiak, Moisés Russo, Bethsheba Orero and Sarah Rosenhek.

understanding of how NGOs can leverage collective power within the context of the UN. The IWHC training was an opportunity to network, to become informed and to learn from the many diverse and experienced speakers and advocates who have already been successful change-makers.

Aleksandra Osiak, Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (ASTRA), Poland.

Aleksandra, 27, is passionate about sex education. In Poland, she says, there isn't enough, and even when it is available, it is unreliable and untrustworthy. She says the non-obligatory programme in Poland called "Preparation for Family Life" is unreliable, unprofessional and biased. "It sustains stereotypes and half-truths about sex. Also, because it's not obligatory, most schools don't have it in their offer."

As a member of Ponton for two years Aleksandra visits middle and secondary schools to teach them about puberty, contraception, HIV prevention and AIDS. She also volunteers, answering phone calls from young people who have questions about their sexual and reproductive health. She has taken part in events promoting the importance of contraception education and HIV prevention. Aleksandra is a graduate of the Warsaw School of Social Psychology and is a member of the Polish Association of Psychologists. She is a trainer (working mainly with young people) and is interested in gender studies. As well as sex education, she is passionate about making women equal in the language of her country. "In Polish we have male and female forms of verbs, but most people just don't use the female forms."

For Aleksandra, the time in New York was an opportunity to learn how the UN works, how NGOs can influence governments, and to get to know people from different countries with different experiences.

Laura Villa Torres, Youth Coalition, Mexico

Laura, 25, is a sociologist and studies youth cultures and gender. A member of the Youth

Coalition and working in Mexico for Ipas, she is also part of a local voluntary group there called Decidir, which works for young women and their right to choose about reproduction. Her major interests are sexual and reproductive rights, young people and women. Laura says the big issues in Mexico relating to sexual and reproductive health and rights, young people and women are HIV and AIDS, violence, adolescent pregnancy, youth migrants, and youth living in marginalised urban, indigenous and rural areas. For Laura, the IWHC training and attendance at CSW was an opportunity to increase her advocacy skills, in particular paying attention to conservative statements about abortion and adolescents.

Moisés Russo, Youth Coalition, Chile

Moisés Russo, 26, is driven by the concept of what people mean when they say "I care". "I think 'care' is as much a need of human beings through their life cycle as it is also an action you perform voluntarily to protect or restore a desirable condition. But most of all it is a mental state of concern and attentiveness to your surroundings and the needs of people around you." Moisés is a physician. He is also part of the governing council of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), which he says allows him to participate with a highly influential network, and a member of the Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, which allows him to connect with exceptional youth that share his concerns.

There are big issues in Chile currently related to emergency contraception and the right of adolescents over 14 years of age to have access to this. A programme on comprehensive sexual education is also big on the agenda, Moisés says. Moisés has a heavy interest in abortion issues, "mostly because I believe that value clarification is constantly required, since an understanding of the ethics of abortion should always lead to a pro-choice position".

Moisés attended the IWHC training to continue with a process of capacity building that he has been going through in the past few years. "I think women's rights advocacy and

its activists should be present in every area of public life, in UN meetings, academia, business, medicine etc. My personal life will develop in hospitals, research institutes and academia, and I believe feminist analysis would benefit all these organisations and workplaces." For Moisés, participating in CSW has allowed him to better understand the "state of affairs" in women's rights, and how to better configure effective arguments.

George Liendo, Centro de Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos (Promsex), Peru.

George, 34, founded Promsex with a group of friends in 2005 because they couldn't talk freely about their dreams and subjects such as sexual diversity and abortion because of the US "Global Gag" ¹ rule.

George's research and activism on gender and sexuality have led him to specialise in masculinity and sexual diversity. He is a member of the Red Peruana Lesbico, Gay, Bisexual y Trans (LGBT) as well as of Colectivo Uniones Perú, a leading advocacy and policy effort for the legal recognition of civil unions among same-sex couples. "I am an activist for sexual and reproductive rights, trying to live in a better world where our rights are guaranteed and people can live without discrimination."

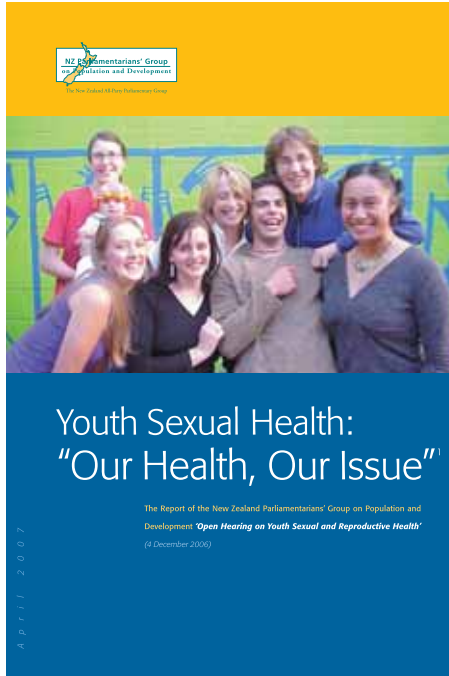
Bethsheba Orero, Population Action International, United States.

Bethsheba, 25, grew up in Kenya, where she interacted with and witnessed the effects of culture, poverty and societal hierarchy on the health and status of women and children. "I do what I do to relieve the burden of social injustice and to empower women economically and socially." PAI, who she joined two months ago, does this through its policy and research work. Beth is passionate about advancing the social status of women so they can fully enjoy all their human rights, and attended the IWHC training and CSW to learn how to interact with other NGOs, governments and international bodies to advocate for changes in policies that discriminate against women and children. "I also need to see the 'big picture', so that I can link how things work from the global to the local level".

¹ The "Global Gag" rule forces foreign NGOs, in return for US family planning aid, to remain silent if they disagree with the US administration's opposition to abortion.

NZPPD launches youth sexual health report

The New Zealand Parliamentarians' Group on Population and Development (NZPPD) launched a hard-hitting report on 3 April that calls for the government to act now to prioritise youth sexual and reproductive health. *Youth Sexual Health: "Our Health, Our Issue"* is the result of an open hearing held in December 2006 that gave ministries, NGOs and health professionals an opportunity to speak frankly to MPs about sexual and reproductive health issues for youth in New Zealand.



New Zealand has the second highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the OECD (behind the US), and high rates of STIs among youth. The report calls for a cross-government approach to improving youth sexual and reproductive health through developing a teenage pregnancy strategy and establishing a Ministerial Taskforce. The report launch took place during an FPAID-hosted visit by Secretary General of the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education, Katarina Lindahl, who attended as a guest speaker and presented the report to Minister of Health Pete Hodgson. While in Wellington, Katarina also

met with government officials, MPs and NGOs to share Sweden's experience with youth SRH. Sweden's teenage pregnancy rate of less than 10 per 1000 women aged 15-19 is a third of New Zealand's (28.4).

Youth Sexual Health: "Our Health, Our Issue" can be downloaded from www.fpaid.org.nz.

FPAID turns 10

It is 10 years since FPAID was established to further the goals of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action. In that time, the unit has grown from a staff member of one to the current team of five dedicated to raising awareness in New Zealand of international population and development issues, and improving access to quality sexual and reproductive health information and services in developing countries in Asia and the Pacific. To mark this anniversary, FPAID is working through a process of reflection and evaluation in order to ensure the unit remains at the leading edge in advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. This process provides an opportunity to gather lessons learned and integrate them into future work to enhance FPAID's effectiveness, as well as developing a core set of values and an overarching strategy to take FPAID forward through the next decade. This is important to ensure that FPAID remains responsive in the face of ongoing challenges such as ignorance, prejudice and discrimination.

New Zealand Family Planning is also celebrating this year, marking its 70th anniversary as a champion for the rights of individuals to access quality sexual health and reproductive services and education.

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Input Are there any topics that you would like to see included in future?