



# March 2009 LAA/UN COMMITTEE

Legislative Awareness & Advocacy/  
United Nations Committees

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Zonta Club  
Of  
Northern Valley, NJ

## 53rd Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women



It has been said that March sometimes comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb. The 53rd Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women began on March 1st and the more than 3000 NGO representatives that descended on New York City from all parts of the world, while no lions, were eager to get down to business. Over the two week span of the Session, there were numerous events and meetings.

The United States NGOs met several times with representatives from the US Mission to the UN. We were assured that the next

four years would not be business as usual and they are looking forward optimistically to the ratification of CEDAW.

The representatives who attended the meetings were all women and pledged that they would be listening to our concerns about women's issues here and around the world.

The Commission is made up of 45 Member States elected by the Council on the basis of equitable geographical distribution, 13 members from Africa, 11 from Asia, 9 from Latin America and the Caribbean, 8 from Western Europe and other States,

and 4 from Eastern Europe. Members are elected for a period of 4 years. The US is a member of the Council.

The principal output of the Commission on the Status of Women is the "agreed conclusions" on priority themes set for each year. They contain a set of concrete recommendations for governments, intergovernmental bodies and other institutions of civil society.

NGO representatives meet with their respective missions and make recommendations as to how they wish the "agreed conclusions" to read.

Written & edited by  
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It is no coincidence that the annual session of the Commission takes place around International Women's Day.

The commission was established by the United Nations on June 21, 1946. It is a functional commission of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It is dedicated solely to gender equality and the advancement of women. It is

the primary international policy-making body on women's issues. It annually prepares recommendations and reports to the Council on promotion women's rights in political, economic, civil, social and educational areas. It also makes specific recommendations on problems which require immediate attention in the area of women's rights.

## President Announces New White House Council on Women and Girls

On March 11th, President Obama signed an executive order establishing a White House Council on Women and Girls. The Council will be chaired by Valerie Jarrett, a senior adviser to the president. The Executive Director will be Tina Tchen, who is currently director of the White House Office of Public Liaison .

“The mission of the Council will be to provide a coordinated federal response to the challenges confronted by women and girls to ensure that all Cabinet and Cabinet-level agencies consider how their policies and programs impact women and families,” according to a memo describing the Council’s work and responsibilities.

Obviously, the establishment of this Council was done at this time in order

to coincide with National Women’s History Month.

While many women and women’s groups hailed this move by the new President, others were more critical. Many women would have liked this position to be a Cabinet-level one. Others feel that the women who have been placed “in charge” of the Council have too many other duties and that they may not be able to give women’s issues the attention they deserve. Of course, this remains to be seen. At least it is a step forward.

The President stated that he decided on a White House Council because he envisioned it as “a kind of interagency task force staffed with 24 Cabinet-level officials in an effort to make each agency consider the impact of regulations and laws on women and

girls.

The focus, for its first year, will be in the areas of, improving women’s economic security by ensuring that each of the agencies is working to directly improve the economic status of women, finding new ways to prevent violence against women, at home and abroad, and improving women’s health care.



## The Global Financial Crisis

According to a report prepared for the 53rd Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the current global financial crisis will have serious gender specific consequences for women in poor countries and their children. Those countries with high infant mortality rates and /or low rates of female schooling will find the vulnerability of women and girls will have a harmful effect. If left unchecked, these crisis will have consequences on women which will reverse progress made in gender equality and women’s empowerment as well as imperil future development.

From past experience, it seems that the gender-specific impacts will be twofold. First will be the impact on women’s income and their work choices. Income will decrease as a result of employment losses in export oriented industries. There will be less micro-financing and/or a drop in repayments.

Secondly, there will be more infant malnutrition and additional infant deaths.

Women are the majority of clients of micro-finance institutions. In Latin America, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, more micro-fiancé groups obtain most of their money from commercial sources rather than through grants.



It stands to reason that these commercial sources will dry up, if not totally, at least to some extent.

As a priority strategy, the report says, the policies of countries should seek to invest in “increasing women’s incomes in poor households...especially in those countries where women are most vulnerable to the negative gender-specific effects of the crisis and where fiscal space is constrained. This should help and should work to help contain infant malnutrition and additional infant deaths.”

The World Bank Group Gender Action Plan will “allocate the majority of its financial resources in 2009 to assist in insuring that the World Bank Group responses to the crisis maximize women’s incomes, especially in those countries where women and girls are most vulnerable to the effects of the crisis.”

## UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

### UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women



Dr. Yakin Erturk is the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. In a recent interview, Dr. Erturk discussed women's rights as human rights. She said, "We refer to human rights as if they were confined to civil and political rights; ...the latter is generally seen as inspirational and the first one as the real thing. But we know from women's lives that unless we have a holistic approach to women's rights, whereby women can achieve economic independence or are at least empowered socially and politically, the rights they may read about in books do not reach them."

The General Assembly, she said, has mandated the Statistical Commission to continue to emphasize violence against women. The thrust of this is to come up with a definition of violence against women along with a system of reporting and monitoring. Monitoring is something that states do not care to do as they are not eager to quantify these matters.

This was the first year in her 15 years as Special Rapporteur that Ms. Erturk was mandated to attend the Commission on the Status of Women meeting. Many of those who attended

her presentation were impressed with her knowledge and her passion for her work.

She went on to say that violence is about the victims but CSW deals with more policy issues as they pertain to women's empowerment. She sees the combination of the two, a more holistic approach, as an "acknowledgement ...to women's rights issues."

Ms. Erturk's mandate has come to an end (she has been Special Rapporteur for 15 years). She leaves with the message that the mandate should not be simply to report findings, but that it should be a monitoring tool as well.

She has spoken with the UNIFEM Trust fund to see if the existing fund can be linked with her mandate so that when the Rapporteur leaves a country and makes recommendations, the fund can be directed toward realization of the Rapporteur's recommendations.

It has been her experience that one of the major problems in the world is the violation of human rights everywhere. She mentioned that this has been more pronounced since 9/11. She says she has always argued that "there is

only one human civilization and that this civilization emerged through interaction..people were never isolated in their own corners. They have always engaged with each other. It is the common suffering throughout history that brought us to the point of designing human rights instruments. It may have been initiated in the west, but it certainly is not the property of the west, and unless we recognize this, we will surrender ourselves to becoming something less than human beings. I don't think that is acceptable."

She goes on to say, "Our public-private divide has in the past been one of the major obstacles preventing women from pursuing their own empowerment in their private lives. But given the patriarchal nature of all societies, this privacy has meant the privacy of the man, the privilege of the man to do as he pleases because the home is the man's castle. What about the woman? What is in it for her?"

Anyone wishing to read the full text of the interview should contact me and I will send it through email (marymac7@veriaon.net.)

### CSW—An Opportunity to Learn and Grow

As my first experience attending a Session of CSW, I was a bit overwhelmed, but I soon got into the swing of things and attended many sessions and presentations. I learned much and met new friends from all over the world. An invitation to visit Taiwan was probably the most interesting. I interacted with women and men from Nigeria, Kenya, the UK, Afghanistan, the Philippines, and many, many more.

Many of the sessions do not require a UN pass. If there is anyone who would like to attend a session next year, I would be happy to make the schedule available and to facilitate the attendance. The theme of next year's CSW will be Beijing +15—a look at the Beijing platform. Over the next few months, through this newsletter, I will continue to describe what I have learned and to share that information.