

The 42nd session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) met in March 1998 at the UN Headquarters in New York to the usual flurry of activities by government and nongovernment organisations of women. Since 1995, the CSW meets yearly to follow up on government commitments to the Platform for Action that came out of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The 42nd session was a meeting to discuss women's human rights, violence against women, women in situations

sessions, hoping that their discussions and conclusions would find their way into the chambers of government and into the concluding documents of the meeting. As usual too, governments mingled with those from nongovernment and, prodded by their consultants, a number of whom are prominent feminists in their own countries, picked up some of the more important points brought up by NGOs, and echoed these in their own small meetings and in the plenary.

In the end, the CSW produced a document that out-

enjoyment of their human rights, the existence of a legal and regulatory framework that ensures the full realisation of all human rights by women and the creation of policies, mechanisms and machineries to support these. In order to speed up the implementation of the strategic objectives of the Platform for Action's section on women and armed conflict, the CSW recommended the institutionalisation of gender-sensitive justice, for government to ensure the specific needs of women affected by armed conflict and the participation of governments, the

# Engaging the UN

by Lilian S. Mercado Carreon

of armed conflict, and the girl-child: issues that resound vigorously all over the world, but most especially in the south of the world, wherever the world's south may be found in this age of globalised poverty and underdevelopment.

Among these issues, Isis International-Manila was most interested and worked hardest on the issue of violence against women. Isis linked this with the continued sexist portrayal by mass media of women and the lack of an international code to guide media on the fair and objective reporting on representation of women.

As usual, the nongovernment organisations who had the resources to travel across continents and oceans gathered together prior and during the entire period of the CSW

lined its recommendations. The CSW reaffirmed the Beijing Platform for Action regarding the campaign to stop violence against women, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Declaration on Violence Against Women. It emphasised the importance of an integrated approach that includes the provision of resources to confront violence against women, linkages, legal and social measures, research and gender disaggregated data collection and changes in attitudes. On women's human rights, the CSW recommended that particular attention should be paid to the economic and social rights of women. It recommended the creation of a positive environment for women's

international community, civil society and women in promoting a culture of peace. On the girl child, the CSW upheld the human rights of the girl child by elaborating on an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on measures for the prevention and eradication of the sale of children, child prostitution and pornography. The CSW also underscored the education and empowerment of the girl child, her health needs and the special needs and rights of girl children in armed conflict. The CSW also called for the ratification and implementation of international agreements designed to protect the rights and fundamental freedom of child workers.

On the issue of violence against women, the CSW

recognised that what is needed is a holistic approach that includes, among others, a review and reform of national laws and efforts directed at changing attitudes and behaviour. The CSW was clear that the media plays a crucial role in perpetuating wrong concepts about women that breed discrimination and sexism. The CSW urged the media to ally with women by promoting images and identities that portray women in their myriad roles on society. But this was nothing new. So Isis pushed for the inclusion of an international code of conduct on media's portrayal of women. The CSW adopted the proposal but maintained that the code should be "voluntary." The CSW inserted just that one in an almost word for word adoption of the Isis' proposal, but that one word watered down the proposal's entire intent.

Other women, veterans of the games at the CSW and the UN, assured us that we should not be downhearted by this development that, they say, we should have expected anyway from the CSW. True, we thought, this is not where the efforts to change women's place in the texts and images and sound bites of media begin and end. The CSW, we reminded ourselves, was useful only in so far as establishing a moral ground for the real work that women must do when we get back to our own countries, our own regions.

But the thought led to questions about the useful-

ness of the CSW and other UN meetings to women's groups with modest resources and to grassroots women's organisations with even less. It was no wonder that at the last CSW, there was only a small number of Asian women's NGOs, and the few who were there were even not as organised and as strong as the African NGOs who came to New York prepared to do battle with gov-



ernments on the issues that were on the table of the CSW. If the CSW's value comes down to just this, then women naturally would rather invest their few and precious funds on struggling with their own national governments on social programs and policies, instead of spending these on statements and documents that governments can choose to ignore anyway, even after they put their signatures to it to signify agreement.

The question is an important one for women's groups, such as Isis International, that see international bodies and gatherings of governments, such as those of the UN as an arena for struggle, but at the same time also to identify with the aspirations of women from

the south. What role or roles should international groups play? One is to link these two by making sure that the information from one end gets to the other and back, in one continuous and dynamic exchange. It used to be that the CSW, for this matter, was highly interested in amplifying women's critique of world issues and policies that impact globally. Recently, the stress

has shifted to good practices and lessons. While models are important and criticisms have not been overtly discouraged, still, the preference tends to stifle and mute critical voices.

One other role is to raise to the international level issues and conflicts that are difficult at individual country levels, so that new pressure points could be added. The UN, through its different commissions and bodies, has done good on a few of these issues, particularly those that have escalated to that of emergencies or have become world wide concerns. But, at the same time, does this not make the UN and its declarations but a stamp of recognition of

issues and conflicts that the most affected already know? How much political and even financial support can the UN muster from its member countries for issues it chooses to advocate, especially if it is advocating for women? If a government, by negligence or by outright refusal, fails to comply with agreements that address women's issues and concerns, there are really no effective sanctions that can be applied against it.

This is precisely the reason why the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was still a major debate and, eventually, remained in limbo at the last CSW. Major debates arose on the articles of the draft Protocol that dealt with issues like who can be considered a victim (Article 2); obligations of the State and mechanisms for protection of the individual petition (Article 12 and 14); follow-up and monitoring of member States after a petition has been filed (Article 16); and reservations to the Protocol (Article 20).

While other rights conventions have optional protocols that give them force, CEDAW continues to struggle for one. Why? Because CEDAW is about women's rights. This year is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights but women's rights, specifically its defence and protection, still do not enjoy the same importance, the same weight, the same status as other human rights.

So what do we do? Do we pack our bags and go home, never to return? That is what the women who fought long and hard for the Optional Pro-

ocol to CEDAW just did. But they left swearing to return. Rather than cave in to the pressures and manipulations of the governments of Egypt, the United States—who actually has not signed CEDAW or any major human rights convention—China and Cuba to agree to a watered down Optional Protocol, the women decided to wait for another chance to fight for an effective protocol bearing in mind that the Declaration of Human Rights took 10 years to pass.

Indeed, the battle for the Optional Protocol to CEDAW is a battle that ought to be fought at the level of the UN. It is one of those that cannot be waged anywhere else. But for other issues and for the rest of us who venture into the CSW and other UN bodies, we ought to deal with these organisations on the basis of their face value to the objectives of our own advocacy. This may sound simplistic (and perhaps it comes from a neophyte to the UN processes and conduct and therefore expects too much), but it is easy to be lulled into the sophisticated world and culture of international bodies, a world that is indeed invigorating. But having government delegates talk about our issues at the CSW does not really mean that a difference is being made in terms of power relations. Participation at the CSW opens possibilities, allows us to meet and connect and gain strength from other women waging the same or different struggles, enables us to meet and connect with people in powerful places and positions who might be able to facilitate

things for us. This is its value. But these are steps towards effecting actual shifts in power.

If we picture ourselves to be a bridge between the UN and the women outside it, then we must always be firmly grounded by the thinking and perception of those women. And perhaps we should begin by finding out how NGO participation can be made more meaningful in the UN meetings.

How can NGOs pressure national governments to adhere to international agreements on women's rights? Asian governments, for example, readily accept and even collectively comply with economic treaties but refuse to work together on issues related to women's rights. How can women, who are half of the world's humanity, gain the power of a handful of businessmen?

In two years, the UN through the CSW will review and evaluate the Beijing Platform for Action. In 1995, in Beijing, women's NGOs came out in full force, so strong in fact that China had a very difficult time with it. The crowd came because the Fourth World conference on Women was a landmark event in terms of spelling strategies for action and policy change. Almost every year since then, monitoring reports are made and published. So what will make the forthcoming UN-CSW review different and significant? Perhaps if the women's NGOs come again, with either plaudits or indictments. But, more importantly, with force and power. ♪

*Lilian Mercado Carreon is the manager of the Communications Program of Isis International-Manila.*