

Feminist persistence pays off at UN Commission Status of Women, but challenges loom large in the changing world of work

Feminist activists have seen their hard work pay off as the UN 61st Commission on the Status of Women adopted a set of Agreed Conclusions that made significant commitments to advance women's rights and economic empowerment in the changing world of work.

In response to feminists' demands for gender-just strategies to confront the multiple impacts of climate change and related ecological damage, the Commission recognized the imperative of moving towards a just transition of the workforce toward low-carbon economies that deliver for women and the planet. "Now is the time for the strongest possible action toward a climate just planet, and this requires actions like a global moratorium on coal and keeping global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius, said Noelene Nabulivou of Diverse Voices and Action for Equality, Fiji. "This must be carried forward through a gender just and equitable and safe transition toward a low-carbon economy." The Commission also called for gender-responsive strategies to increase women's resilience to the economic impacts of climate change.

Recognizing that women continue to shoulder the bulk of unpaid care and domestic work, the Commission established a blueprint for governments to reduce and redistribute this work through public services, labour and social protections, and affordable child and other care services. The Commission also urged governments to measure the value of unpaid care and domestic work through time use surveys, which will help measure progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The Commission also recognized the role of trade unions, collective bargaining and social dialogue in addressing economic inequalities and the importance of strong, global labour standards that protect women's rights in the world of work.

For the first time, the Commission recognized the importance of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as it examined the focus area of indigenous women's empowerment. The Commission also called upon governments to respect and protect indigenous women's traditional and ancestral knowledge, and address the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and violence that they face. "That the Commission on the Status of Women also called for support for Indigenous women's financial independence and economic self-determination, for example by establishing Indigenous-owned businesses, is a hard-won but important step for Indigenous sisters around the world," said Sarah Burr, of the YWCA Australia.

In other wins, the Commission urged governments to end violence and harassment against women in the world of work, with a specific focus on strengthening and enforcing laws and policies and developing measures to promote the re-entry of victims and survivors of violence into the labour market. It also recognized that sexual and reproductive health and rights is essential for women's economic rights, independence and empowerment. "These were hard-fought gains as countries like the United States, Russia and Guyana worked to weaken governments' resolve to tackle violence and harassment and protect sexual and reproductive rights," said Shannon Kowalski of the International Women's Health Coalition. "Governments must face the facts that women's rights to exercise autonomy over their bodies and lives is critical to their economic empowerment." Language on families was also constructive in that it implied the reality of a diverse range of family structures.

Despite these advances, women's rights activists continue to express their vexation that governments are unwilling to fundamentally change the global economic, financial and trade

structures that exacerbate inequalities within and between countries or to address the harmful impacts of globalization that result in the exploitation of women workers.

They are also frustrated about the Commission's recalcitrance to name specific groups of people who are marginalized in all regions of the world. "People's bodies and integrity are under attack and governments need to be courageous enough to name these realities and fight to change them," said Eugenia Lopez-Urbe of Balance, Mexico. "Whether because of race, ethnicity, caste, class, disability, age, HIV status, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics, the silence of governments on these issues cannot continue," she said.

At a time when women's human rights are under attack globally, international spaces become all the more important. "As civil society spaces at the national level are being shut down at a rapid pace, regional and international mechanisms very often become the only arenas where we can get our voices heard," said Sehnaz Kiymaz of Women for Women's Human Rights-New Ways, Turkey. In this context, women's rights activists at the meeting were outraged by the attempts to marginalise their voice and influence by the unprecedented effort to remove them from the UN during late-night negotiations. Over 700 organisations endorsed a protest letter within a 20 hour window, which resulted in their restored access.

The Women's Rights Caucus is a coalition of more than 250 feminist and women's rights organizations from across the globe.