

Women's Rights and Issues

By Laura Rostowfske

As I prepared to head on an amazing experience at the United Nations, I perused the trip itinerary. It was comprehensive with meetings with agencies, individuals, and briefings on topics from AIDS prevention to non-governmental organizations and one having a direct reference to women's issues. As we began to meet with different groups, however, the theme of women's rights slowly started to stand out.



On the first day, we were briefed on women's issues by Mr. Antoine De Jong, Outreach and Business Development Advisor at UN Women. The second day, we heard from UN Development Programme staff who discussed how empowering women leads to poverty reduction. On day three at UNICEF, we discussed the importance of women's empowerment in stopping the spread of AIDS/HIV to children. The fourth day brought a meeting with the director of the Youth Assembly who stressed the need for dialogue with youth of both genders in order to build partnerships and affect change. On the last day, we met representatives of the UN Population Fund, where we were informed of the significance of educating women so that every pregnancy is wanted and safe. What had appeared initially to be a minor focus of the trip turned out to be a critical common factor across all of the UN agencies.

The UN started to recognize the importance of women with multiple resolutions. In 2000, the UN adopted the Millennium Development Goals, which tackle some of the toughest issues of our time, two of which focus heavily on gender equality and women empowerment and improving maternal health.

Moreover, the UN adopted Resolution 1325 in 2000 which also called for member states to promote the equality of women in their governments, economies, education systems, laws and other aspects of life in the participating countries. It was a landmark resolution that formally encouraged stronger support for women's rights.

More recently, the UN re-designed its approach to women's rights by creating a central unit that consolidated multiple UN programs. It is called UN Women and is led by the previous president of Chile, Michelle Bachelet. This entity oversees the implementation of all policies, programs, promotion and issues related to women's issues as stated by UN mandates.

These programs and others are some of the few ways women are becoming included, respected and necessary in the promotion of different issues related to health.

How effective have these steps been? Many argue that there have been significant improvements in all fields related to women, as seen for example in the sizeable gains in Malawi for healthy motherhood promoted by the country's first lady, Madame Callista Chimombo. However, there is always need for improvement. The only two countries that have not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women are Somalia and USA and one in three women in the world will be subjected to gender violence. By promoting the rights of half of Earth's population, the world can be changed.