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Women's Meaningful Participation: The Missing Ingredient at CSW61

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Huffington Post

It's March, the month where thousands of women activists descend on New York to advocate, network, reconnect, plot, and attend the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). All of that is important. But not this year. This year it's different.

On 13th March, the 61st session of the CSW (CSW61) will open. The atmosphere will be anything but normal and it should not be; to normalise what must forever be abnormal is to endorse it.

As a result of the heinous travel ban by the Trump administration, women from several countries know that they are not welcome in the US. Yes, there has been court injunction but the executive fights back, and why should women risk possible detention and deportation to attend a UN event? It is not just women from the "maleficent 7" (ostensibly reduced to 6 by the new Executive Order). The list is growing as we find out who is missing: women from Nepal, Bangladesh, Colombia, DRC, Nigeria, and elsewhere also did not get visas. Women who are able to attend CSW and come to New York will protest the absence of their colleagues and denounce the policies, but they will never be able to speak on behalf of those forced to be absent.

Forgive me for mentioning it, but there is an agreement made in 1947 between the host state and the UN. It says that:

"The federal, state or local authorities of the United States shall not impose any impediments to transit to or from the headquarters district of [...]: 4. representatives of non-governmental organizations recognized by the United Nations or by such specialized agency on official business. The appropriate American authorities shall afford any necessary protection to such persons while in transit to or from the headquarters district [...]"

But since when did law and diplomacy interfere with barefaced Islamophobia, racism, and xenophobia?

It is, of course, outrageous (as are so many of the acts taken by the new US Administration in the one month of tenure), and it behoves all of us to make as much noise about it and in as many ways as we can. That goes for Member States, the UN Secretariat and agencies as well, by the way!

To boycott or not to boycott: that was the question we at the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) considered after the original travel ban was put in place in late January. We were bringing women from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to the CSW, but this was no longer possible. We were bringing women from Bosnia and Herzegovina to the CSW, but they refused to come when the women they were supposed to share panel with could not be there. And there we were. The numbers of no-goers were increasing and for coherent reasons. We reflected, discussed

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and then we took the ground-breaking decision that WILPF, the oldest women peace organisation in the world and a strong supporter of the UN, would not formally engage in CSW61.

Boycott it is not. We are totally supportive of our partners and fellow NGOs who will be in New York denouncing the absence of so many women, protesting the travel ban, and demanding that the UN and the Member States do not roll over in the face of this belligerent administration.

While our partners are standing the ground in New York, WILPF will instead use another part of the UN, the Human Rights Council in Geneva, to do what we were going to do with our partners from MENA at CSW. Consider it a strategic re-engagement to open alternative spaces for the women who couldn't use their intellectual, activist muscle in New York.

President Donald Trump's assault on women's rights to participate in a UN process has vividly illustrated the vulnerability of the UN to external decisions. It has shone light on the growing evidence of the 'shrinking space' for civil society in ... well just about everywhere. This, at a time when there is compelling research that the agency and participation of women is crucial in achieving and sustaining peace. Lip service is paid, but the reality exposes the hypocrisy – or the incompetence. I am angry but also frustrated with our constant exposition of that hypocrisy, over and over again as women try to get into peace processes, influence UN policies, and finally resolve the right to our own bodies. And so little happens!

There are many who are now scared, me too. Dangerous times where nastiness and untruth reign and almost everywhere we seem to have saddled ourselves with appalling leaders! If ever we need to say "The time is now" and mean it, it's now. Seriously! It's our turn.

So, WILPF is not boycotting CSW. Instead our plan is to continue our work for feminist peace in Geneva and around the world. This month, we will support women activist from Yemen and Libya to travel to Geneva to share what they intended to share with the UN, Member States and fellow activists at the CSW. Their voices will be heard. Their work will be valued.

Women's meaningful participation is the most important and overlooked ingredient for sustainable peace, and it is essential to ensure that the UN decision-making processes fulfil their purpose.

As another part of creating change, WILPF will in this Spring hold a civil society convening to which we will invite the UN and the Member States. An event building on the original principles of CSW and reclaiming women's true and meaningful participation in the UN processes. An event that will help bringing back the UN to its Charter.

In a world where billionaires can pay to have truth invented, the only way to have clarity is to talk to each other in honest dialogue. We need to work to understand how we get back to the values of the Charter and how to make real all the promises of human rights that we have created over decades of long and hard discussion and negotiation.

The UN is ours, it just has lost its way and we need to get it back.

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Winter is coming, maybe it has come. I have no idea how this will end but one thing that I know for sure is that we at WILPF are determined that we will have a bloody good go at bringing Spring.