



Canadian Feminists at the UN Commission on the Status of Women: An Advocacy Primer

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Acknowledgements

CRIAW-ICREF acknowledges its presence and work on the Indigenous Territories. We respectfully recognize the legacy of colonization upon Indigenous Peoples.

Copy Editor: Janine Bertolo with Consensual Copy

Design: The Public Studio

Layout: Kenya Thompson

Publisher: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW-ICREF)
250 City Centre Avenue, Suite 807, Ottawa, ON K1R K67

ISBN: 978-1-77483-010-9

This project has been funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada.



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Want to take your advocacy to the next level? Make connections between the local, national and global? [The United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women](#) is a great way to advance your priorities on the international stage, to forge new relationships with global feminist movements, and to advance the human rights of women in all their diversity at home and abroad.

What's the CSW?

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is the primary UN intergovernmental body dealing with gender equality.

The CSW meets for two weeks annually, usually in March, and brings government representatives, civil society organizations and feminists from every corner of the globe together to take stock of progress, explore emerging issues and pressing challenges, examine promising practices, and celebrate gains.

Established in 1946, the CSW's initial mandate was to "prepare recommendations and reports to the Economic and Social Council on promoting women's rights in political, economic, civil, social and educational fields" and to make recommendations "on urgent problems requiring immediate attention in the field of women's rights." Following the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) in 1995, the CSW mandate was expanded to include monitoring progress and problems in implementing the BPfA, as well as mainstreaming a gender perspective in UN activities.

The Commission is made up of representatives of 45 member states elected on a regional basis for four-year terms. A Bureau made up of representatives of each region (African States, Latin American and Caribbean, Western European and other States, Eastern European States, and Asia and Pacific States) takes on the task of preparing for the annual sessions and ensuring they run efficiently. Each new Commission meets immediately upon closure of the previous session to elect its Bureau and Chair.

Each year the Commission examines a priority theme and negotiates a set of agreed conclusions containing specific recommendations for action to advance progress on the specific issues from the priority theme. The Commission also sets a review theme to assess progress with implementing previously agreed conclusions. The Commission may also address specific emerging issues or new challenges. Themes are set [five years in advance](#).

The Commission's procedures are established through a resolution on the [Methods of Work](#), which is reviewed and amended periodically.

Beijing Review Years

Every five years, the CSW dedicates itself to reviewing progress in implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Member states are expected to submit detailed reports on the actions taken in each of the BPfA's [12 critical areas of concern](#), assessing both progress and challenges and describing key trends, gaps, achievements and plans for future action. The reports should also include consideration of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) from a gender perspective.

Governments are expected to collaborate with civil society and other relevant stakeholders in the development of these comprehensive reviews. Reports are submitted to the [regional Economic Commissions of the UN](#), who hold preparatory meetings and prepare regional reports.

Civil society organizations are also invited to submit shadow or parallel reports in order to share their perspective on global, regional or national progress. Canadian organizations have collaborated on a parallel report for each five-year review. The most recent report, [Unfinished Business](#), was coordinated through the Canadian Beijing+25 Network and was published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA). These reports are often used to support feminist advocacy priorities in Canada, such as submissions during federal budget consultations.

During review years, civil society organizations can also participate in regional meetings of the Economic Commissions to discuss progress across the regions. Canada is part of the [UN Economic Commission for Europe](#), which meets at UN Headquarters in Geneva. National, regional and civil society reports are synthesized into a global report by UN Women submitted to the CSW.

During BPfA review years, rather than adopting negotiated agreed conclusions, the CSW has often adopted broad political declarations. Because these declarations are usually determined in advance of Commission meetings, opportunities for civil society to influence the language are limited. Regardless, feminist organizations optimize review years to highlight the failure to make meaningful progress toward full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action - and to push for concrete solutions.

Civil society parallel reports can be excellent springboards for activism and advocacy at home and in multilateral spaces like the CSW.

Civil Society Participation in the CSW

Why the CSW?

The CSW provides Canadian feminist organizations with a unique opportunity to connect their work in Canada with global feminist movements and to view their advocacy through the lens of Canada's international human rights obligations. It provides organizations with a platform to hold the government accountable, and an opportunity to influence the government's work at the UN, as well as its efforts to advance gender equality at home.

The CSW is the largest annual gathering of women's rights and feminist organizations and advocates, governments, and the UN system dedicated to gender equality. It creates opportunities to showcase success, highlight challenges and barriers, as well as opportunities to network, collaborate with and learn from other jurisdictions. Civil society organizations are central to CSW's success. Beyond participating in events and conference sessions, CSOs can collaborate with governments to influence the outcome of negotiations and meet directly with decision-makers to discuss issues of priority for domestic advocacy agendas.

Canadian civil society organizations have a longstanding tradition of collaborating in the leadup to and during the CSW meetings, especially in BPfA review years. The CSW also creates possibilities for collaboration and solidarity with partners in global feminist movements, adding strength and momentum to our collective efforts. These collaborations can take the form of joint statements, coordinated lobby strategies, press actions, creative demonstrations, digital actions, and more.

How to get there

Civil society organizations and feminist activists can choose from many pathways to participate in the Commission on the Status of Women. **Civil society organizations that have consultative status with ECOSOC** may register participants in the annual CSW. For the last decade, the number of participants for each organization has been limited to 20. Consult [this list](#) to determine whether your organization has consultative status. [Applying for consultative status](#) takes time, requires meeting specific criteria, and organizations must submit a report every four years to maintain their status.

TIP: Consultative status also entitles organizations to a limited number of annual passes to enter the grounds of the UN headquarters, so some of your representatives may not need to register for the CSW to attend the events. This is a great solution for organizations who like to send larger delegations but may also want to include elected officers or staff.

If your organization is a local, regional, or national branch of a larger, global entity that has ECOSOC consultative status, you can contact them to determine whether they are sending delegates and what their application process might be.

CSO registration usually opens in the late fall and closes in mid-January. Late registration or changes to delegate registrations are not permitted. Individuals register using [the UN's electronic platform](#) and must be approved by the organization's main contact. Delegates then receive confirmation and information on how to pick up the grounds pass (a badge worn around the neck while on site) in New York.

The **Government of Canada** includes several civil society representatives in its delegation (which also includes the Minister of Women and Gender Equality Canada, other government ministers depending on the theme, provincial and territorial ministers, representatives from national Indigenous women's organizations, experts from government departments, and representatives of Canada's Permanent Mission in New York). Normally, a call for applications is circulated in the late fall or early winter. Selection is based on expertise, ensuring regional diversity, diverse perspectives, identities and constituencies are represented in the delegation. Usually, the Government brings their CSO delegates for the first week of the annual meetings, so any delegate who wishes to stay on for the second week is expected to cover their own costs for that period.

Communications regarding the CSW are usually circulated by the Ministry of Women and Gender Equality Canada through an electronic mailing list. If you are not already receiving communications, you can contact cfc.ccfnu-uncsw.swc@cfc-swc.gc.ca to ask to be added to the list.

What to expect in New York

Your first CSW can be an overwhelming and intimidating experience. There are many different types of events, held in different places, some requiring registration and some

open to all. There are formal meetings of the Commission, high level dialogues, town halls, social events, sessions organized by governments, UN agencies, and non-governmental organizations. In addition to the official events, NGO CSW New York hosts a massive parallel conference attended by thousands of activists who may or may not be participating in the official CSW proceedings.

Official CSW events are set by the Bureau and follow a similar approach every year, including a ministerial segment that invites governments to summarize their activities, high-level dialogues, and interactive roundtables, all focused on priority theme, review theme, and any emerging issues. These events sometimes involve civil society speakers or respondents who participate at the invitation of UN Women. CSO delegates may observe the proceedings but not take the floor.

There is a process for civil society to make general statements to the Commission on the priority theme, or to intervene during an interactive dialogue. Applications for these spots normally open in January of each year and the spots are allocated by UN Women.

A UN Grounds pass (acquired with official CSW registration, or an annual pass from your organization) is required to attend official CSW events. CSO participants are usually confined to meeting room galleries, and there is often overflow space where you can watch the proceedings with language interpretation. In addition, [UN WebTV](#) streams the events online.

Side events are organized by member states or UN entities, often in partnership with other governments or civil society organizations. They can cover a wide range of topics but usually focus on either the priority or review theme. Most of these events take place at the UN Headquarters but occasionally can take place at Missions or other locations near the UN Headquarters, due to limited space. The list of these events is posted on the CSW website in the weeks leading up to the event, with information on registration when it is required. Generally, these events are first come first serve, and the rooms can fill up quickly as some are quite small. Language interpretation is not always available, so make sure to note the language of the proceedings.

TIP: Sometimes passes are available to attend these events for those who are not CSW delegates. Look for events requiring registration and contact the organizers. These passes allow access to the UN Headquarters to attend the session.

The NGO CSW Forum is a massive parallel conference organized by civil society organizations under the umbrella of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women in New York (NGO CSW/NY). Any organization can apply to host a session and be listed in their schedule of events. Usually, these applications are due in early December, and require a fee to cover the overhead of running the event. In 2020, the Forum shifted to a virtual event as the COVID-19 pandemic and public health measures prevented large gatherings and international travel. For 2022, the NGO CSW Forum will continue to be a 100% virtual event, creating opportunity for broad participation of feminist and equality-seeking organizations and feminist activists who experience financial, geographical, political, or other barriers to attending the events in person.

The NGO CSW/NY also organizes a Consultation Day, usually the day before the CSW begins. This can be a useful opportunity to learn and connect with others, especially if you are participating for the first time. During the two weeks of the CSW there are civil society briefing sessions where participants can learn about what is happening in the official meetings and share common priorities. Regional caucuses also meet twice during the session.

Finding out what is happening, and when

The official meeting schedule, list of side events, and all official documents and information about the CSW, are available on [the CSW website](#). A conference app becomes available in the weeks leading up to the event.

Information on the NGO CSW Forum, the parallel civil society conference is available on [the NGO CSW/NY website](#). Registration for the Forum will give you access to the conference platform which also includes information on regional caucus meetings, briefing sessions, advocacy opportunities, and other events.

TIP: It's easy to get overwhelmed by the range of choices and the different lists of events. Whether the event happens in person or online, it's important to pace yourself, to have a backup plan if your event is full, and embrace a certain amount of chaos. No matter what, you'll learn something new, connect with someone new, or have a chance to share your own story or priorities. All good things!

Influencing the negotiations

The outcome of each CSW meeting is a negotiated document of "[agreed conclusions](#)" that lays out primary theme elements, and makes recommendations for action by member

states and other stakeholders. Typically, these negotiations take place in the second week of the CSW, but the process actually begins much earlier.

In the fall before the CSW, UN Women convenes a meeting of experts in order to discuss the priority theme. From this meeting, they provide background papers and a report which is then used to help craft a report issued by the UN Secretary-General. This report is typically released in January and followed by a “Zero Draft” which is the starting point for the meeting’s agreed conclusions. Member states are then invited to make recommendations for changes to the Zero Draft. The Facilitator of the negotiations (usually a member of the CSW Bureau) receives the proposed amendments and circulates a compilation document that includes all the proposed changes. This revised text, or Rev. 1, is the starting point for informal negotiations that begin one or two weeks before the CSW meets.

The Informal Rev. 1 discussions are closed to civil society and often only include representatives of the member states’ permanent missions in New York.

For this reason, it is vital to begin lobbying as soon as possible to recommend Canada include amendments that align with the priorities of Canadian CSOs, support progressive amendments made by other governments, and oppose regressive language.

TIP: Look for the Zero draft when it is released - usually it will be posted on the CSW website and is sometimes circulated through networks like the Canadian Beijing +25 Network. Women and Gender Equality Canada will send the draft to its UNCSW email list with instructions for providing feedback.

TIP: When you share your priorities and suggestions, include specific wording recommendations and provide examples, if possible, of other international agreements that have used the same wording (UN resolutions or declarations, for example). Also provide a rationale for negotiators to understand why the proposed change is important.

TIP: Once the formal negotiations have begun, member states are focused on streamlining the process, so it becomes much more difficult to introduce important new ideas or concepts to the text. Engage the government (either through the Ministry of Women and Gender Equality Canada or the Permanent Mission in New York) as early as possible to share your views on the priority theme and recommendations for what should be included in the conclusions.

Negotiations occur during the second week of the CSW, and new revisions are issued as agreements on paragraphs are reached. Discussions are intense and often quite fractured, with clear lines being drawn around concepts framed by some member states that are considered controversial. Negotiations can extend into the wee hours of the morning, and developments can happen quickly. Consistent presence of civil society in the discussions is essential to ensuring inclusion of good language, flagging problematic phrasing, and expressing support for fundamental principles.

Unfortunately, the CSW space limitations make it difficult for civil society to participate in the negotiations. In-person meetings are closed to observers and only official members of a government delegation or representatives of UN Agencies are allowed in the room. In order to be accessible to government representatives for consultation as required, civil society normally holds vigil outside the negotiating room.

The Canadian government representatives normally hold informal daily briefing sessions which give CSOs a chance to learn more about what is happening and to give feedback.

In 2020 the CSW conducted virtual negotiations, and member states were permitted two spots in the online meetings. While some member states assigned their second spot to civil society, Canada opted to open channels of communications so civil society organizations could receive updates and give feedback electronically. In addition to keeping their electronic mailing list informed and soliciting written proposals, they convened a small “rapid response” team of experienced CSO reps at key points during the negotiating period.

This initiative was welcomed and worked well, but there were considerable limitations to this approach, especially in the final days of negotiations when changes were negotiated and drafted rapidly. The opportunity to follow the process and give feedback in real time would benefit both the government negotiators (who are generally not experts in gender equality or women’s human rights) and civil society.

What happens after conclusions are adopted?

Other than brief reports to the CSW when themes are reviewed, there are no concrete mechanisms to ensure that member states follow through with the actions identified in the agreed conclusions. It’s up to civil society to hold their governments accountable for their commitments. Feminist organizations can hold their governments accountable with public awareness campaigns, engaging the media, offering to work with the government to establish oversight and tracking mechanisms, engaging in research, and by working in

coalition. The civil society report on Canada’s implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, published every five years, is an excellent opportunity for flagging progress or inaction.

The Generation Equality Forum

For the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, UN Women initiated a process called the Generation Equality Forum (GEF), bringing governments, civil society and youth, international organizations, the private sector, and philanthropic organizations together to find ways to harness new resources and energies to accelerate progress towards gender equality.

Initially, the Generation Equality Forum (GEF) was intended to bring the diverse participants together in two global gatherings, hosted by the governments of Mexico and France. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic forced an adjustment to these plans that resulted in bringing thousands of people together virtually. The March 2021 [Mexico City Forum](#) addressed impacts of the pandemic on women and girls, and explored the key structural and systemic obstacles to implementing the Beijing Platform for Action.

The Mexico City Forum launched six Action Coalitions - global partnerships involving civil society and youth-led organizations, governments, international organizations, and the private sector to identify key priorities for action that would “deliver concrete, game changing results” and mobilize resources to promote transformative change.

The six Action Coalitions are:

- Gender-Based Violence
- Economic justice and rights
- Bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)
- Feminist action for climate justice
- Technology and innovation for Gender Equality
- Feminist movements and leadership

In addition, the Compact on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Actions was formed through a parallel collaborative process, with the similar approach and objective of driving action and resources toward progress.

Together, the Action Coalition blueprints form a five-year Global Acceleration Plan. Draft blueprints were unveiled and discussed at the Mexico City Forum, and the final [Global Acceleration Plan](#) was launched at the Paris Forum in July 2021. The Plan includes a targeted set of actions, strategies, and tactics to achieve the vision set out by each Action Coalition. Action Coalition leaders (key governments, civil society organizations and other stakeholders) are expected to make specific commitments that align with the Plan - policy, advocacy, program and financial commitments - and create an accountability framework intended to ensure that the commitments made are followed through and yield the desired results.

Following the Mexico City Forum, governments, civil society and youth-led organizations, and other stakeholders were invited to join the Action Coalitions as commitment-makers, making specific commitments for action in line with the coalition's Blueprint. A series of announcements that, according to UN Women, represent nearly \$40 billion in investments, were announced at the Paris Forum, a primarily virtual event held June 30 to July 2, 2021.

A complete list of commitments is not yet publicly available, so it is difficult to determine what proportion of this funding will support the leadership and work of feminist and youth-led organizations and activists in driving change. In the months following the Paris Forum, UN Women conducted a series of consultations to inform the development of an accountability framework for the GEF initiative. Once released, the framework and public list of commitments will allow feminist and youth-led organizations in Canada and globally to monitor progress and assess the outcomes around commitments made by governments and others.

Civil society organizations in the GEF

The Generation Equality Forum process depends on the active engagement of all organizations and institutions that want to see progress toward gender equality. Civil society organizations are encouraged to [join Action Coalitions](#) at any time, and to make commitments to advance change and yield measurable results.

Commitments can focus on policy, advocacy, programs, or finances, and should be connected to the Global Acceleration Plan and blueprint developed by the Action Coalition. Commitment-makers are also asked to identify ways to advance change within their organization as well as externally, and also to consider the intersectional dimensions of

their issue or action. Organizations are encouraged to collaborate with others in the development and execution of their commitments.

How can the GEF help advance feminist priorities in Canada?

The Generation Equality Forum is intended to stimulate progress toward gender equality and the advancement of human rights for women, girls and gender-diverse people in all countries. Canada's commitments must support transformative change globally and domestically. Feminist organizations can hold the government accountable for the commitments they have made, and encourage the government to make new commitments to address persistent gaps and challenges. The Global Acceleration Plan holds a lot of potential to meet many longstanding feminist demands - it's up to organizations, activists and movements to work together in the Canadian Beijing +25 Network and other coalitions, and to leverage the GEF process to advocate for and implement meaningful, measurable progress.