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UN holding the line on women's rights – but much remains to be done

Women's rights took small steps forward yesterday when governments at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) committed to a series of measures to tackle gender-based violence, this year's priority theme.

The Commission's outcome document calls on governments to take a broad range of measures to tackle violence against women and girls around the world, including those experiencing domestic violence or facing conflict and post-conflict situations.

The session's agreed conclusions call on States to ensure that women's human rights, including their reproductive rights, are protected and fulfilled. States must grant access to sexual and reproductive health services, and the Commission, for the first time, called for access to emergency contraception. Governments must also develop and implement comprehensive evidence-based education for human sexuality for all adolescents and youth.

The agreed conclusions also importantly contained a reference to the support and protection of women human rights defenders.

“As part of the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition, we welcome the recognition of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) by the CSW and the pledge to support and protect them” said Danna Ingleton of Amnesty International's Individuals at Risk Team. Women defenders speaking at the UN highlighted how enabling WHRDs to act without fear of reprisals, coercion, intimidation or attacks is central to ending violence against women and girls. “How can there be an end to violence against women and girls if those speaking out for human rights are themselves targeted or subjected to violence?” asked Danna Ingleton.

Many of the commitments made in New York this week mirror the obligations governments must implement under the international human rights treaties. “It is reassuring to see that the CSW reaffirms that states must refrain from invoking any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to the elimination of violence against women,” said Nicole Bjerler, from Amnesty International's UN office in New York.

However, governments also failed to reach agreement on a number of important issues central to eliminating and preventing violence against women and girls.

“We are profoundly disappointed that important issues such as intimate partner violence, sexual and reproductive rights and others were removed from the text.” said Nicole Bjerler. “We are dismayed to see that there is still resistance – including by the delegation of the Holy See – to acknowledge and to seek to address violence experienced by individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.”

As in previous years, the work of the CSW met with resistance and opposition from delegations and religious groups. Positions such as those reflected in a statement issued by the Muslim Brotherhood were strongly rebutted by civil society organisations and women's rights bodies in the region.

Civil society organisations from all over the world were closely following the positions held by their governments in the negotiations. Many expressed concern at government positions which, if adopted, would have undermined the universality and indivisibility of human rights or re-opened discussion on already established international agreements on women's human rights. A statement of concern signed by hundreds of civil society organizations during CSW is available online at <http://cwgl.rutgers.edu/program-areas/gender-based-violence/csw57/statement-on-outcome-document>.

Thankfully, many governments held firm on commitments to women's rights and secured the adoption of agreed conclusions which reflect existing standards. Governments must now put their words to action by effectively implementing the agreed conclusions.

“The agreed conclusions are a tool in the hands of those tasked with making girls' and women's rights a reality – from law and policy makers to school teachers, from police officers to health workers. They are also a tool for those seeking to hold governments to their obligations to end gender-based violence against women and girls,” said Stephanie Schlitt, Amnesty International's gender expert.

The UN Commission on the Status of Women meets annually in New York and in 2013 focused on the elimination of violence against women. Comprised of 45 Member States the CSW is the principal global policy-making body dedicated exclusively to gender equality and advancement of women with the sole aim of promoting women's rights in political, economic, civil, social, and educational fields. Its mandate is to ensure the full implementation of existing international agreements on women's human rights and gender equality.