My First Days at the UN In Geneva: Awe, Appreciation, and Aspiration

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Arrival: My mom used to say that some of our best decisions are the spontaneous ones. Standing in front of the shiny, towering flagpoles that flank the path to the United Nations building in Geneva, I could not have agreed more.

In spite of having registered on the last day possible for the NGO Forum- Beijing +20 UN ECE Regional Review, I was happy to be here as I took a quick glance back at this awesome and magnificent sight before heading on to rendezvous with my fellow FAWCO attendees. This was the moment I'd been looking forward to; the chance to connect the names, faces, and smiles with what had been up until then only e-mails and photos.

Being a new member of FAWCO, I was both excited and slightly anxious to meet everyone. After being recognized and greeted enthusiastically by My-Linh Kunst, our FAWCO President, I was introduced to the other members of our group. As we sat down together to enjoy our first cup of warm nourishment that morning, any prior butterflies I had melted away with each sip.

Graced with over 700 delegates, representing NGOs from around the world (including FAWCO) present, this Forum would comprise one of the largest gatherings ever focusing on the Current Status of Women. While the first day was of introductions and ceremonies, our second day involved getting down to the business of the Roundtable Discussions. Participants were able to choose from, according to their interests, passions, etc. four of sixteen Roundtable presentations, each covering different critical emerging issues and areas of concern. The discussion panelists included a combination of UN Representatives and expert specialists of the various fields.

Drawing from my own experiences and continuing interests, I was eager to join the programs highlighting Women in Poverty, Women and the Economy, and Women in Power and Decision-making. Featuring ten speakers, 'Women and Poverty' took off very quickly and kept on rolling like a freight train on a mission. It was as though the ideas, emotions and agendas which had lain dormant for the past 20 years were simmering just below the surface, and now were ready to burst forth like a powerful volcano! Excellent and gifted with eloquence and tremendous energy, the panel touched upon everything from economic poverty to emotional poverty and time poverty. The goal of the discussion was to explore ways of improving and securing the equality of women by reducing and eliminating poverty. A sobering figure we learned was that a staggering 98 percent emerge from it. Emerging from this discussion, I felt a newfound gratitude.

The next two Roundtable exchanges I had the pleasure of attending were Women in the Economy and Women in Power and Decision-making. They both represented, for me, a natural and essential progression from the issues, challenges and opportunities that had come to light in the earlier discussion. While targeting the promotion of women’s economic empowerment, they generally addressed the basic human right to live in dignity. The main issues were concerning attention to unpaid care work, the shifting role of mother’s in the workforce, and achieving a better gender equality in the corporate and political arenas. Like the first discussion, the dynamic speakers were informative, organized and extremely impressive.

Our third, and regrettably last, morning in Geneva had arrived. The closing comments, made by Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, the Organizer of the Forum and President of the World WYCA crystalized, for me, the meaning and message of the past days: that 20 years since Beijing, women’s equality has not significantly advanced. While we’ve come a long way, and many milestones have been reached, we need to aspire higher. On a daily basis, women are still taking home less pay for equal work, must make heart-wrenching decisions about child care, and are facing the ever-increasing perils of slavery, forced labor, abduction, and other situations which rob them of the control over their destinies. The good news is that through Forums such as this one, we are given the unique opportunity to unify as one voice for those who cannot.
As we all took our places inside the large, impressive assembly room for the last time, our hearts swelled with admiration and pride as we listened to Robin (our Cultural Ambassador) and Julia (our Youth Ambassador) open the proceedings with the Theme Song 'Maybe It's You.'

When I enthusiastically accepted the invitation to be a part of the FAWCO delegation, as one of the new kids in town, I wasn’t sure what to expect. So, it was wonderfully encouraging and reassuring to discover that we shared not only a commonality of nationality, but also of purpose and spirit. I’m very grateful to be part of such an outstanding organization, and have yet to meet more welcoming, warm, and supportive ladies. Thank you so much for a memorable, enriching, and fun time in Geneva, and I look forward to seeing you all again soon!