United Nations Initiation

My recent attendance at the UN ECE Beijing +20 Regional Review in Geneva (to assess the global status of women) was chock-a-block with new faces, new topics, new acronyms. “This is it,” I thought. “I’m going to the United Nations in Geneva to fight for change, for improvements for women.” Who I met and what I learned was much bigger than my solitary thoughts.

In early November, we spent three days at the UN in Geneva. The days were filled networking with women: meeting ex-Heads of State, Nobel Peace Prize nominees, plus women who, like me, found themselves there at this review. Its purpose was aimed at unifying the voices of women’s NGOs from Canada to Uzbekistan. I met dynamic passionate people, predominately women, who have dedicated their lives to improving my lot by effecting changes with far-reaching consequences. These very changes have helped improve the world for my daughter.

The forum wasn’t limited to the UN NGOs connecting. It allowed me to connect as well, with fellow FAWCO members from clubs across Europe, (there were two of us from AAWE Paris – Sallie Chaballier and myself.) We were 17 strong in the FAWCO delegation – one of the larger participating groups. Ten of us “camped” throughout our stay at a home facing Mont Blanc. Our early mornings were filled with invigorating hillside walks reveling in our location above Lake Geneva amongst the vineyards. Getting to know these women better occurred during the rides to and from, attending sessions together, setting the table for dinner, discussing the day’s presentations, and the natural jostling for turns in the “loo”. Our bonding was being forged in the sisterhood of how much progress versus how much resistance the world experienced coupled with a leavening of our own necessities.

I learned about my companions through time spent with them and our conversations...not only the ones about the magnitude of the topics at hand, but as well, through the small conversations concerning life’s daily issues. I learned about my own history as a woman; how I am perceived and controlled throughout much of the world. I learned that in some parts of the world “my” breasts are ironed while in others I am not even considered a second-class citizen – I am literally and legally, a piece of property. But I also learned “I” have created women-only cyber cafes ensuring a safer environment. “I” have collected 100,000 women’s signatures in distant Congo, and then sent them via the internet to the U.S. White House, thereby securing a special envoy to help me in my plight. I learned that the recent austerities (due to economic downturns) have given rise to the number of violence-against-women incidents not only in France but across the region. Although this is a glaringly alarming trend I learned it is countered by a spreading “White Ribbon” campaign initiated by men taking responsibility for men’s behavior.

The most important item I learned though is that I am not alone. I have the support of women worldwide. This support manifests itself not only on the global stage through our FAWCO connection to the United Nations, but on the immediate stage of the here-and-now through the interaction of women’s groups in whichever city or country they reside. I am proud and delighted AAWE is one such organization, supporting its members and the community in which we find ourselves.
By Suzanne Wheeler (AAWE Paris)
The FAWCO Foundation
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