

The 65<sup>th</sup> Annual UN DPI/NGO Conference at the United Nations  
2015 and Beyond

August 27 – 29, 2014

***Background***

The Women of Reform Judaism's participation at this annual conference dates back to the earliest years of WRJ's representation as an NGO at the United Nations. For the past several years, the conference, which had traditionally taken place at UN headquarters in New York, was held at various locations abroad, including France, Mexico, Australia and Germany. WRJ was fortunate to be represented at each of these conferences by Janet Stovin, WRJ's Main NGO representative to the UN. Janet was elected to the executive planning committee for this year's conference and was recognized along with the other committee members at the concluding ceremony.

Due to lack of funding, there was in fact no DPI/NGO conference at all last year, frustrating and disappointing all those who are so actively involved in the work of their respective NGO. This year 900 NGOs from 117 countries attended, with 2000 representatives participating in the conference's 60 workshops, roundtables and plenaries. The response was so great that registration was closed several days early and it was reported at the opening plenary that almost 4000 had applied to attend. Many youth organizations were in attendance as a result of DPI's (Department of Public Information) outreach effort to insure that the next generation of civil society would be well prepared to carry on the important work of their respective NGOs.

***Impressions and Reflections***

Since Leslie Brier has given you a very comprehensive and insightful overview of the workshops we attended, I will focus my comments on sharing with you some of the important messages that were delivered at the conference. The message was clear, whether from a grassroots women's labor organization from South Africa, or from Samantha Power, the United States Ambassador to the United Nations, which is that while much progress has been made in the achievement of the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) since they were established in the year 2000, much work remains to be done, for example in the area of sanitation. There are 2.5 billion people who live without access to clean water, which has wide ranging

consequences from child mortality to the impact on women and girls who in many cultures are tasked with procuring water.

It is estimated that 600 million people have been moved out of poverty since the year 2000, the most successful push to eradicate poverty so far and that millions have received HIV retroviral drugs. While these are great successes in the achievement of their related MDGs, at the same time there are several areas of disappointment. A recent UN report cites the appalling facts that an estimated 50 million people worldwide are externally or internally displaced and that there continues to be high levels of abuse against women and girls worldwide. An example of where these two issues come together is in refugee camps where displaced girls and women often face the threat of sexual abuse.

Although Climate Change was not one of the original MDGs, it is now a cornerstone of the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals). One year from now, in September 2015, there will be a climate summit in Paris, at which the UN member states will affirm the specific targets that the SDG working group will have developed during the course of the year. The urgency of Climate Change has been demonstrated by the threat of island nations being literally submerged underwater to the reality of New York City being devastated by Hurricane Sandy, the effects of which are still being felt.

### ***Women's Issues***

A theme I heard repeatedly at the workshops, especially those paneled by women's groups, is that women had little if any say in determining what the targets should be for the MDGs and that they must have input in the SDGs if their needs are to be met at the local level. For example, a UN study cited that there are approximately 39,000 child brides yearly in India alone, a country with a rising standard of living for many but still a very dangerous place to be a girl. When the Director of Coordination for UN Women (the UN entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women) talked about the need for improving the use of existing data to focus on new initiatives to address issues of the pandemic of violence against women it prompted questions during the Q&A about how specifically the political will of member states must be brought to bear in enacting and enforcing laws to combat this problem.

One way that an NGO such as ours can become involved on a local level in order to support the work of UN Women is by our WRJ sisterhoods becoming involved

with the work of the United States National Committee for UN Women. They recently began a re-launch campaign entitled “Empowering Women Empowering Humanity” – because the two are truly linked. More can be learned about the organization by visiting their website, [www.unwomen-usnc.org/events](http://www.unwomen-usnc.org/events).

### ***Conclusion***

Ambassador Power’s remarks at the opening plenary concerning the need for civil society to be the movers and doers in changing the world were echoed by Jan Eliasson, UN Deputy Secretary General, when he said that we live in very critical times, with Cold War ghosts coming out of Europe and with unspeakably brutal events in places such as Iraq and Honduras, we in civil society must understand that “no one can do everything but everyone can do something”. When I heard this my thoughts went to our faith tradition’s call of Tikun Olam.

Deputy Secretary Eliasson went on to implore those assembled to work toward peace, development and human rights. It struck me that at several of the workshops which were organized by faith based NGOs, the idea that every religion must have human rights at its core was a concept that mirrored Deputy Secretary Eliasson’s remarks. Several speakers followed, among them the founder of the Bring Back our Girls campaign. She closed her remarks to a standing ovation as she asked us to maintain our advocacy on behalf of these girls. I learned with pride from Leslie that the WRJ national board adopted a resolution supporting this vital campaign.

There were several speakers from youth organizations, which were extremely well represented at the conference. These young people brought great enthusiasm and showed a commitment to developing a post 2015 advocacy agenda that reflects youth priorities. In terms of NGO attendance, this was the most diverse group in many years. It was said that 2015 will be a transformative year as we move the agenda from the completion of the Millennium Development Goals to the establishment and launching of the Sustainable Development Goals. By WRJ’s continued participation as an NGO at the United Nations, we will continue to be an important part of the dialogue in this important transformative year, as we have been for six amazing decades.

Respectfully submitted,  
Rosalyn Shapiro