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A Critical Assessment of the Internship at the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, New York

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A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE INTERNSHIP
AT THE NGO COMMITTEE ON THE STATUS OF
WOMEN, NEW YORK

BY

CHING-KANG WANG

A capstone research project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of
New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Women's
and Gender Studies in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the
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04/27/2018

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ABSTRACT

A Critical Assessment of the Internship at the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, New York

by

Ching-Kang Wang

Advisor: Professor Matt Brim

This capstone research project is the critical assessment of my internship paper at the The NGO Committee on the Status of Women, New York (NGO CSW/NY), which documents my experience of working from September, 2017 to December 2017. Part one focuses on the analysis and observation on LGBTQ human rights work at the United Nations. Part two records my work and experiences at the NGO CSW/NY, including the UNGA Gender Mapping Project and UN meetings. Part three is my observations and reflections upon the half-year internship experience, which serve as reference for people who intend to do NGO advocacy work in the UN setting.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Never had I ever imagined that I can one day study in New York City. These two years have been magical and unbelievable with surprises and serendipity every day. This city has offered me more than I could have asked for. I am glad I live in my dream, and indeed have done something remarkable here. Thank you, The Graduate Center. Thank you, NGO CSW/NY. Thank you, New York City. I have a great time here. 謝謝。

Ching-Kang (Ken) Wang 王慶剛

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Prologue

On September 6, 2017, I started my internship at The NGO Committee on the Status of Women, New York (NGO CSW/NY), which supports the work of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and UN Women, as well as represents more than 100 member organizations and individuals concerned about the status of women and girls. Regularly, I am required to work 2 days a week for a minimum of 12-15 hours. The major task for interns is to assist the Committee in the preparation of various events and provide support to the NGO CSW/NY office for the upcoming NGO CSW Forum 2018 and UN Commission on the Status of Women session. However, during this semester, the preparation has not yet started, so interns are given much liberty to explore topics that they are interested in. I, therefore, tried to explore LGBT issues as much as I can.

This final paper will be divided into three major parts. The first part will focus on the LGBT human rights work at the UN, its progress and limitations. The second part will document my work and experiences at the NGO CSW/NY. The third part will be my observations and reflections.

Part One: LGBT Human rights in the UN and the NGOs

The discussions of LGBT issues and active interventions to end violence and discrimination are far from sufficient and effective at the United Nations. The UN since its inception has been a common ground of struggle concerning sexuality and gender identity. It is not until 2011 that the High Commissioner for Human Rights submitted the first UN report documenting global practices of discrimination and violence against people based on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), and advises that international human rights law be used

to end these violations (McGill, 2014). In July 2013, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) launched the “Free and Equal” public education campaign that “aims to raise awareness of homophobic and transphobic violence and discrimination, and encourage greater respect for the rights of LGBT people.” In 2016, the United Nations Human Rights Council passed a resolution to appoint an independent expert to find the causes of violence and discrimination against people due to their gender identity and sexual orientation, and discuss with governments about how to protect those people.

Though it is obvious that SOGI was integrated into the international human rights agenda at the UN in recent years, McGill (2014) argues that the incorporation of SOGI into human rights discourse at the UN produces a new matrix of inclusion and exclusion that must be unpacked, analyzed and contested. First, it furthers the marginalization of transgender people, gender expression and intersex people in international rights discourse. Second, the Western-based identity categories are entrenched that lack applicability across contexts. Third, the simple addition of SOGI to existing human rights discourses results in fragmented and unpredictable norms related to sexual and gender diversity.

Mulé, McKenzie and Khan (2016) also points out that bringing LGBTQ issues forward at the UN is complicated by the cultural diversity that present itself – a diversity whose social development on LGBTQI fronts have been globally inconsistent. Advocacy on LGBTQ issues hence risk itself in falling into homonationalist Western and Global North notions from the developed world.

The Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, Vitit Muntarbhorn, submitted a report in July, 2017, which addresses two major underpinnings: decriminalization and anti-discrimination. The report

suggests that the UN help ensure integration of issues relating to SOGI into programming and practices of human rights work. States should reform the laws, policies and practices which criminalize consensual same-sex relations, and ensure a variety of stakeholders adopt educational and capacity-building measures in regard to SOGI to nurture empathy towards diversity. Part 2 and 3 of the report, which deal with other 4 underpinnings, legal recognition of gender identity, destigmatization linked with depathologization, and sociocultural inclusion and education with empathy, will due in 2018. Unfortunately, Muntarhorn resigned in October 2017, and the successor has not yet announced.

Though thoroughly documenting the present problems and suggestions on violence and discrimination against LGBT people, the present report still lacks the cultural sensitivity, failing to understand how local cultures influence the acceptance of LGBT people. It also fails to address how to incorporate SOGI into human rights framework.

As for NGOs advocating LGBTQ rights at the UN, Unitarian Universalists is committed to bringing SOGI/LGBTQ human rights to the forefront of the UN agenda. Its director, Bruce Knotts, also serving as the co-chair of NGO committee on Human Rights, is a longtime advocate on LGBTQ issues. Unfortunately, not much has been done on the NGO side. The NGO committee on Human rights is planning to establish a sub-committee on LGBT human rights, but there is not much going on lately. The NGO CSW/NY does not pay much attention on LBT issues either.

I talked with Mr. Knotts several times, and as far as I observed, there is not much to do about advocacy. Mr. Knotts told me his way to incorporate LGBTQ human rights issues into the UN agenda is by constantly proposing questions and topics about this issue to raise the awareness. That is what I mostly did as my way of advocacy on LGBT human rights.

Part Two: Working in the NGO CSW/NY

UNGA & Mapping Projects

Every September, the major event of the United Nations is the annual General Debate, in which heads of State, Government or heads of delegations of 193 UN member states gather together at UN Headquarters to speak at the opening of the new session of the General Assembly and discuss global issues, as well as sharing their countries' standpoints on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Each intern was assigned to listen to a number of countries' addresses and take notes of their standpoints about SDGs. This assignment is called the Mapping Project, and the result of the project will be compiled in a report, which gives an open configuration to NGOs and other invested stakeholders to process the huge assemblage made available through the General Debate speeches, as well as holding those countries that made the remarks accountable.

I will begin with my attendance to the UNGA meeting on September 21st. That was my first time to enter the UN General Assembly Hall, which I could only watch on TV. After passing several security checks, I finally arrive at the balcony level of the Hall. In the first hour after I got there, most speakers were leaders of African countries, and not many people were there. This is a sad reality that people did not pay equal attention to countries which are not influential to the world, though UNGA was held to provide all member nations with equal representation. Frankly speaking, I was a bit bored and absent-minded then. Then I noticed more people entered the balcony and it was pack eventually. It turned out that Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, took the podium. As one of the favorite politicians currently, his presence soon grabbed people's attention and explained the gradual crowd of the Hall.

Justin Trudeau delivered a good speech, in which he switched between English and French

since Canadian speak both languages. He spent most his speech on the rights of indigenous people in Canada. He promised to reach the SDGs by bringing safe and clean drinking water to all indigenous communities, which was in line with Sustainable Development Goal 6, bridging gaps in education in indigenous communities, in line with Goal 4, and working with indigenous communities to build and refurbish homes, in line with Goal 11. He also focused on combating gender-based violence and giving women and girls equal opportunities, in line with Goal 5. He was apologetic to how indigenous people have been treated in Canada and promised Canada was dismantling its old colonial bureaucratic structures that risked indigenous people's human rights.

I was quite impressed by his speech in terms of his focus on issues of indigenous issues. Among all 193 member states, Canada was one of the two countries mentioning indigenous issues with apology, and I was glad this topic could be brought up by the leader of the countries at such an important occasion.

Back to mapping project, I was assigned with ten countries, and it took us about two months to finish the recording and notetaking. Most countries on my list, including Australia, Ireland, Switzerland, mention gender equality emphatically. For example, Ireland promised to “doubl(ing) the number of women in our Defense Forces with the aim also of increasing female participation in peacekeeping..... increased female participation leads to better decision making, improved situational awareness, a better focus on protection of civilians, and enhanced reporting of and accountability toward sexual exploitation and abuse,” and Switzerland promised to “support(s) the commitment of the Secretary-General to fight any form of sexual exploitation or abuse by UN staff in the field..... will make a contribution to the UN Trust Fund for victims of sexual exploitation and abuse.”

To my surprise, Namibia mentioned gender equality the most in my batch. Its president

provide the sex-disaggregated data of political participation, indicating the representation of females is 48 percent in Namibia's National Assembly, the second highest on the continent and among the top five in the world, including the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. I did not know much about Namibia until I started this project, and I even had some stereotype about African countries. Clearly, some countries are making progress on women's rights.

In addition to gender equality, the report also includes other themes of SDGs, including refugees/migrant women, climate change, youth rights and inclusion, education, health, poverty and indigenous. Through the division of themes, I can see the issues of gender equality should be discussed and approached with intersectionality. For example, climate change is not a neutral but a gendered problem that women commonly face higher risks and greater burdens from the impacts of climate change in situations of poverty and the unequal participation in decision-making processes and labor markets. Health issues are also gendered. That only half of women in developing countries have received the health care they need, and most women in in developing countries have no access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including family planning, information and education. In school, we have talked about gender being intersectional repetitively, but it is after this project that I realize how gender plays an important role in most global issues.

To my disappointment, no country during the 72nd General Assembly mentioned LGBTQ issues, not even Australia and Germany, which recently legalized same-sex marriage. Though several countries (28 in total) deliberated their promises and goals in achieving gender equality, they all considered gender issues a women's issue that happens to women and affects women exclusively. Actually, in Goal 5 of SDGs: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, the emphasis is put on the empowerment of women and girls, while LGBTQ issues, or as

they are termed at the UN, sexual orientation and gender identity, are totally left out. This is really frustrating given the LGBTQ movement is one of the biggest civil movements currently, yet the countries at the UN still remain silent about this topic.

UN Meetings

One of the benefits of the internship is the UN Badge and access to UN and related civil society events. During the fall semester, we interns are given more liberty to explore topics and issues in which they are interested by attending events, and we are encouraged to write blogs about the events. I have been to several events of the UN and related civil society. Below, I will elaborate some events that I found interesting and thought-provoking with brief summaries of the events and my reflections.

One meeting titled “Hidden Victims: sexual violence against men and boys in conflicts” talked about this alarming yet underrepresented issue, whose speakers consisted of representatives of Liechtenstein, Switzerland, the UK, Canada, as well as a special representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict. All speakers indicated that there are an unclear number of hidden victims of men and boys that have been severely neglected and underreported due to stigmatization, problematic legal frameworks and norms of gender identity. As sexual violence is usually regarded as something exclusively against women, this problem is gendered so that victims of other genders failed to be addressed. Inadequate laws, including international criminal law, where rape is framed in gender-neutral terms, failed to bring charge of male rape; instead, allegations of rape are framed as torture or ill-treatment without addressing the sexual aspect. The failure of legal justice to the perpetrators leads to a lack of access to remedies and reparations by male survivors. Also, the stigma of homosexuality and the social norms of masculinity give rise to a double stigma against male sexual violence survivors, especially in

countries where same-sex sexual conduct is criminalized. Therefore, a paradigm shift needs to happen, and all victims of violations deserve equal attention and protection.

This is the first time after I started this internship to hear about “homosexuality” discussed in a UN event. I was glad that this topic could be raised and discussed in the UN and someone noticed the factor of homophobia. The fear of being discriminated or even criminalized due to the unfair homophobia in some cultures weighs down male victims of sexual violence, and the stigma of homosexuality further challenges their masculinity, which is yet another social problem most men face. The interlinkage of problems makes the issue underreported and somewhat unspeakable. Here, I could see how gender studies on homosexuality and masculinity can intervene to diversify the social expectation, and further improve the legal system to protect everyone.

Besides events at the UN, NGO CSW/NY also has a monthly meeting. In response to the Priority theme of CSW forum next year, challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls, all monthly meetings this semester center around this theme. The topic of the November meeting was “Safe and Sustainable City,” and I was asked by Ilana, my training supervisor, to be a respondent. I am not an expert in this topic, but Ilana told me to focus on my research interest and connect it with the safety and sustainability of the city. After days of thinking, I decided to raise some issues regarding LGBT people, their safety in the city as human rights.

All speakers focused on adding women’s views in urban planning, both by including women in the planning team and taking women’s concern into consideration. One proposed the idea that cities should not be safe just for some people, and some women, as other groups are left behind. If the safety of a city is available only for certain people, it will be worlds apart for

women who could not enjoy the safety due to their social status or identity. Therefore, we should leave no one behind by “connecting worlds together.”

I was quite inspired by this remark, which happened to resonate with my responses. After I took the stage, I said, due to homophobia and transphobia, LGBTQ people are more vulnerable than their heterosexual fellows. Many LGBT youth end up homeless and later cause or suffer violence. Also, according to the statistics of Human rights campaign, at least 25 transgender Americans were fatally shot or killed this year, most of them transgender women of color. When transphobia mixes with misogyny and racism, there will be fatal consequences. So I asked, is a city safe for everyone regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity?

Though this topic is not directly related to LGBT people, but as I believe a city should be safe for everyone, and everyone should feel safe in a city, I was happy to have the opportunity to voice my opinions about it and bring LGBTQ issues to NGO CSW/NY, just as Mr. Knotts said, to try to address LGBT issues in every topic to raise people’s awareness and attention.

Due to limited space, I will not go over every event I attended. As far as my experiences, some events, such as what I mentioned above, were interesting, yet some were pretty boring and generic. This is one of my new observations. The meetings at the UN tend to be general and diplomatic without really progressive and radical thoughts and practices. Often time I heard was “we should raise the awareness of,” “something should be more inclusive,” or “the UN should put more effort on.....” Those ideas are not bad, but they are sometimes known by most people and empty without practical direction and application. Whether it is just the way people do at the UN or there could be a better way is what I am still thinking about after I attended so many events.

Part Three: Observation and Reflection

As a Taiwanese intern.....

It all started from the time I went to pick up my UN badge. I have always known that Taiwan, with its controversial international status, lacks diplomatic recognition, so I was glad to be accepted by NGO CSW/NY and thus have the access to the UN. At first, my application for the badge did not go well, and my supervisor even asked me whether I have another passport. Then they “solved” the problem and I guess they found a way to circumvent the nationality issue. So when I stood at the counter of UN Pass and ID Office and was denied the issue of my badge because they do not recognize and accept Taiwan passport, which is nothing more than waste paper, I felt extremely humiliated and isolated. That was the first time that I keenly experienced the limited diplomatic space and what it means. I never felt so left out from the international society simply because of the political struggle between Taiwan and China.

It turned out the UN Pass and ID office also recognizes state-level ID, so I still got my badge after I got my State ID Card few weeks later. Even so, it would not change the fact that UN does not recognize Taiwan passport, or R.O.C, so to speak. The feeling of being left out also occurred when I was working on the mapping project. Taiwan was not a member state of the UN, yet China does not represent Taiwan de jure, so Taiwan is actually overlooked in international society. We do not get a say, let alone participating in international affairs. Nevertheless, Taiwan is the most populous state and largest economy that is not a member of the UN, but our efforts and human rights are neglected. I felt really frustrated and helpless as a Taiwanese in getting more involved in international affairs.

Absence of LGBTQ discussions

The passage about the absence of Taiwan could be the segue into this section, the absence

of LGBTQ discussions, which are also quite left out at the UN and NGO CSW/NY.

At first, I applied for this internship in order to learn more about LGBTQ issues and advocacy within the UN, which I clearly stated in my applicant statement and interview. I was hoping that I could see discussions of LGBTQ rights at the UN and how NGOs strive to put LGBTQ Human Rights on the UN Agenda. Unfortunately, during the last four months, no meeting or conference (at least to my knowledge) was held with the topics regarding LGBT issues. There were several meetings about gender equality and women's rights, but even in those meetings, issues of LGBT, termed as sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) at the UN, were not explicitly mentioned, let alone discussed.

As a student who is concerned with and sensitive to LGBT issues, the reality is really frustrating yet not surprising. As many countries nowadays are still haunted by homophobia and criminalize same-sex sexual conduct, it is difficult to put this topic in the agenda of the UN. For them, it could be important but not urgent. The absence of discussion also makes me think about how gender studies can help in this situation. Clearly, some problems of LGBT in other parts of the world are so basic yet life-threatening with people lives at stake and well-beings deprived. How can we, sitting in the classroom talking about radical queer theory, do to help?

What is in stake in gender equality?

The same question can also be applied to gender equality. From this internship, I found out that some problems women and girl face in the world are so fundamental, such as clean water, safe food, access to education and medical resources. In a world where development is uneven, how can we end the unfair treatments against women and girls, while remaining radical and progressive?

Conclusion

To be honest, the internship at the NGO CSW/NY is not as exciting as I expected, and the discussions at the UN are not as productive and progressive, either. UN, in essence, is a big bureaucracy, where people should be diplomatic and inoffensive. How to advocate gender equality and women's rights while respecting the cultural distinctiveness and development of a country is still a question that leaves much for me to explore. I will try to pay attention to more discussions on LGBT issues in the rest of the internship, and I look forward to the CSW forum in 2018.

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