**Feminist leadership delivers on women’s human rights at the UN Commission on the Status of Women**

*March 25, 2019* — Feminist persistence at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) has delivered new international standards on women’s human rights to social protection systems, access to public services, and sustainable infrastructure. These gains were achieved in spite of the increasingly polarised political environment at the UN’s biggest annual gathering on women’s rights.

“In the face of extreme pressure and cyber-bullying, the majority of delegations stood strong in defence of women’s human rights. What we’ve seen at the UN in the past two weeks is a mirror to the world: attacks on both the human rights of women and the principles of multilateral diplomacy,” said Jessica Stern, executive director at [OutRight Action International](https://outrightinternational.org/). “However, CSW’s outcome shows that when feminist movements, both within the institutions and outside, come together to hold governments accountable, progress is unstoppable.”

Governments, for the first time, recognised the right to social security—including universal access to social protection—and that women’s access to social protection is often restricted when tied to formal employment. The Agreed Conclusions acknowledged that budget cuts and austerity measures undermine women’s access to social protection, public services, and sustainable infrastructure, particularly in the areas of health and education. They also recognised the link between gender-responsive social protection and the prevention of gender-based violence. And, crucially, committed to providing public sector workers with living wages.

The Agreed Conclusions, also for the first time, recognised the diverse gendered impacts of sustainable infrastructure.

“This is a seismic shift in how infrastructure is connected to the lives of women and girls,” said Dr Caroline Lambert, director of research, policy, and advocacy at the [International Women’s Development Agency](https://iwda.org.au/). “The Agreed Conclusions assert the importance of institutional mechanisms for integrated gender-based impact assessments in infrastructure projects and planning.”

The Agreed Conclusions included women and girls as users, producers, and leaders in the sector at all scales, from community energy systems and water and sanitation facilities to larger infrastructure projects. Governments additionally pledged to improve health care infrastructure, and acknowledged its role in addressing maternal mortality.

In the first week of the CSW, young people across the world marched and rallied for climate justice, including outside the United Nations Headquarters. Feminist activists at the CSW stood with the students in solidarity.

“The Agreed Conclusions have a strong focus on climate change and its impact on sustainable infrastructure, social protection and public services,” said Viva Tatawaqa, incoming political adviser at [DIVA for Equality](https://www.divafiji.com/) (Fiji).

However, the reality of climate change damage means that a stronger focus on gender justice, social services, social protection, and infrastructure that is designed, implemented, and monitored by and with grassroots communities, women’s rights activists, and environmental defenders is required. It is concerning that the Agreed Conclusions do not reflect the urgency of just transitions from fossil fuels to renewable safe energy.

In addition to the thematic achievements, the Agreed Conclusions reaffirmed prior agreements on universal health coverage, sexual and reproductive health and rights, education, gender-based violence, the need for policies that address the diverse needs of families, and the responsibility of the state to protect women human rights defenders.

These victories have even greater significance given the unprecedented attacks on women’s human rights and autonomy led by Member States such as the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, with support from the Holy See, a permanent observer to the UN.

Despite our significant gains, challenges remain to realise the full human rights of women, in all their diversity. Of significant concern was the removal of service provisions for survivors of violence—a development out of step with the growing realisation of the prevalence and consequences of gender-based violence. Member States also failed to commit to integrating sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression into the design of social protection, public services, and infrastructure systems. Governments and civil society continued to use trafficking as a means to advance anti-sex work arguments. The Agreed Conclusions also demonstrated the unwillingness of governments to regulate and hold the private sector accountable for its responsibility to uphold women’s human rights.

“Governments reaffirmed that women’s human rights are universal, indivisible, and interrelated, but too many still want to pick and choose which rights, and whose rights, to uphold,” said Shannon Kowalski, director of advocacy and policy at the [International Women’s Health Coalition](http://iwhc.org). “Feminists will continue push to ensure that the rights of all women and gender diverse people, everywhere, are realized.”

This is of heightened importance as we approach the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action—the milestone conference that declared women’s rights are human rights—the 75th anniversary of the UN, the 20th anniversary of resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security, and the 5th anniversary of the Sustainable Development Goals. These milestones provide opportunities for the feminist movement to continue leadership in national and regional reviews, and in turn inform the global recommitment to Beijing and beyond.

In that context, we stand with many governments who took the floor to condemn cyber-bullying of the CSW facilitator, Her Excellency Koki Muli.

“Around the world, every day, women human rights defenders are targeted for their defence of human and women’s rights. We stand together with Her Excellency and all the other women human rights defenders who face intimidation for the work they do to advance gender-related rights,” said Sanam Amin, programme officer at the [Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development](https://apwld.org/).

At this critical moment, CSW must continue to involve the vital voice of civil society in their deliberations and strengthen the ability of negotiations to continue the practice of consensus-based advancement of human rights. We remain committed to the practice of effective multilateralism and look forward to strong and constructive discussions at CSW64 to ensure that the CSW continues to uphold the advancement of women’s human rights.