

K.C. Ho

Women in the World Summit

On Thursday, April 4, and Friday, April 5, I attended the Women in the World Summit in New York City, hosted by the Daily Beast (Newsweek) and the Women in the World Foundation. The two-day event featured celebrities and guest speakers (mostly women) from all over the world who have made a difference in various fields, structured into timed panels of different topics. (See the full agenda here: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/03/08/women-in-the-world-summit-2013-agenda.html>) The summit shared all types of inspiring stories and big issues that women face and tackle. Most importantly, it also recommended solutions that we can check out and get on board with. The use of technology enhanced the summit's purposes to promote ideas and increase publicity; there were free wireless internet and summit coverage on so many social media platforms, and the program even provided us specific hashtags to tag on Twitter and Instagram.

Overall, the summit touched upon many issues I had learned about in courses from the Poverty Justice Human Capabilities minor and from the Study of Women Gender and Sexuality major. One of the panels was on human trafficking and featured Susana Trimarco, an Argentinean woman who has campaigned against human trafficking in Latin America for 11 years since her daughter disappeared 11 years ago. I am currently working on the human trafficking Wikipedia article for my SWGS 322 course, and I have learned about human trafficking last year on my Alternative Spring Break trip in Houston as well. I was surprised that the summit did not invite someone from a prominent NGO against human trafficking, considering how big and how many NGOs there are on this issue, especially in the United States alone. There are many controversies surrounding human trafficking – centered on the concept itself, the data, and the efforts against human trafficking – and none of these were particularly touched upon in the panel, neither by Trimarco nor by Joy Ngozi Ezeilo, the special rapporteur on trafficking in persons from the United Nations. The attention on human trafficking has been rising in the past few years, usually through the dramatized portrayal of human trafficking that essentializes all human trafficking to be a monolithic crime where totally powerless and marginalized women are abducted and coerced into selling sex, complete with unspeakable violence and abuse. I was disappointed that the summit did not bring up the complexities of the issue.

Two panels that I really enjoyed were ‘Outcry In India’ and ‘The Next Generation of Malalas.’ The issues of women in the Middle East and South Asia deserve attention and the panelists provided a very poignant picture of social norms, sexual violence, and education in India and Pakistan. I was humbled and inspired by two particular panelists, Humaira Bachal and Khalida Brohi. Both girls work on the ground in Pakistan to further women's rights and education, often directly clashing with men's attitudes and control of women. Despite the opposition and the fact that their work puts them in danger every day, Khalida and Humaira actually seek out the men and talk to them about their beliefs. The videos of conversations that Humaira and Khalida have with local men on their restriction of girls are repulsive and misogynistic, but to enact change, the girls knew that they must get the men on board. We talk a lot about changing social norms in my SWGS 322 course, but these two brave girls are actually making it happen every day.

The tragedy in New Delhi sparked protests not only against sexual violence against women, but also against institutional failures of the Indian government. I wonder if all the outcry could be the tipping point in India, but I am ambivalent. At best, this is only the beginning, because while the Indian government has since passed a new, more stringer law on violence against women, there

K.C. Ho

Women in the World Summit

are still loopholes, and as I see it, the biggest problem is not de jure practices, but de facto practices. If even police officers have beliefs contrary to the law (social norms, again), how can we expect change? This reminds me of the concluding discussion in *Poor Economics*, a book we read for class, where the authors Banerjee and Duflo argue that there are small things that we can do that matter despite our inability to fix institutional problems, and I wonder if small things can be done to at least increase police compliance with the law in India, as well as increase the percentage of females in their law enforcement.

Lastly, I really appreciated the ‘Saving Mothers: A Surprising Solution’ panel. Compared to the other Millennium Development Goals, maternal health has made very little progress, and the problem exists to a different degree even in the U.S., which ranks behind most industrialized countries in terms of maternal health. This shows that women of all regions bear the brunt of social inequalities and that issues of women's health relating to sex, besides HIV/AIDS, have been neglected. How is it that HIV/AIDS is a popular issue that everyone can campaign on, but maternal health is not deemed nearly as important? Having worked on the Wikipedia article on obstetric fistula last semester for HUMA 280, I learned that maternal health issues are underrated, underfunded, and involve a lot of stigma and misunderstanding, making it an issue very contingent on social norms. When we imagine health issues in Africa, we think of HIV/AIDS, but we rarely think about mothers who have no recourse to proper maternal healthcare and the dire need for midwives and doctors for expecting mothers. I hope that as resources are poured into children's health, we also put more resources into keeping mothers healthy.

Although the summit was very glamorous and fancy with all the networking dinners, art performances, free souvenirs, and celebrities, there are still very serious issues that women face and tackle together today. The most important thing that I carry with me from the conference is that like what Jane Aronson, founder of Worldwide Orphans Foundation, said, it is about keeping it in our minds, even if we like to put things away when we face something overwhelming. As a SWGS and PJHC student, I think a lot about these overwhelming issues. But I have the luxury of putting these problems away sometimes. As for some women, these are issues that they live and breathe every day, problems that they cannot simply put away, and that is what keeps me going.
