
REFLECTIONS ON THE 2012 UN PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

by Aimee Ferguson

This year I attended the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues ('UNPFII' or 'the Forum') as the assistant to Megan Davis, state elected Expert Permanent Forum member and this year's Rapporteur of the UNPFII. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues began on 28 July, 2000, as a forum that allowed Indigenous groups of the world to meet together for diplomatic discussions to lay out the ongoing human rights challenges that Indigenous people face, in order to determine solutions. This year was the Eleventh Session of the UNPFII. The special theme was the Doctrine of Discovery: its enduring impact on Indigenous peoples and the right to redress for past conquests (articles 28 and 37 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). This short paper is a discussion of my experience at the UNPFII and the issues raised therein.

On Sunday 6 May, 2012, the opening ceremony to the Forum was held in the General Assembly Hall of the United Nations headquarters. I have never felt so elated to be a part of something as I did on that Sunday. When I looked around, I saw Indigenous people from all over the world; some of whom were dressed in the traditional clothing of their people. The array of textures, colour, features and variety of dress were startling and depicted the diversity of the Indigenous groups and cultures that are spread across the world. As a non-Indigenous person I felt quite overwhelmed because my understanding of just how important the Forum was to people was rather one dimensional, even though I was filled with information and good intentions. Having empathy and the will to make a change is one thing, but actually having a lived experience and understanding is another. Throughout the two weeks of the conference the most vital lesson I learned was that everyone has a voice and wants to be heard, and if you are willing to listen, it does not matter who or what you are. My way of learning this lesson was through respect; respect in the form of listening when others speak, never presuming or believing you understand a complex issue when you are not a part of it, respecting those with more knowledge than you and learning from them and realising that everyone has a role to play (Indigenous group, NGO

or Member State) in the success of the UNPFII as a significant part of the United Nations.

As Megan Davis' assistant I got to experience a very unique perspective on the Forum. Megan is a state-elected Expert Panel Member on Indigenous issues from Australia representing the Western and Other Group ('WEOG') and she was also elected Rapporteur for the Eleventh Session. As a result I was able to listen to the various discussions brought to the floor on the different issues addressed at the forum and I was also able to view in depth the recommendations laid out by Indigenous groups wishing to make changes on the Doctrine of Discovery and the other items on the agenda.

It was very informative for me to hear about the different issues facing Indigenous groups from around the world. For example, violence perpetrated on Indigenous women and children and the effects of pollution and environmental damage on Indigenous lands, territories and resources were two commonly discussed items. It was alarming to hear how many violations against Indigenous peoples' human rights were being perpetrated around the world. Whilst I am familiar with the history of human rights abuses suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, my knowledge of other Indigenous groups was limited. The experience was eye opening and on occasions upsetting, especially knowing that many of the issues and violations are deeply ingrained in society and are not easily nor quickly fixed. Regardless, however, of the disposition of the issues, or the situation, a common understanding and humanity presented itself at the UNPFII where everyone there could accept and acknowledge that the issues of another group of people were of significance and deserved to be voiced. There was a common understanding that everyone was there to be heard, to state the rights and acknowledgment of their people.

The problem was that the Forum has limited time and a rigid agenda and not everyone can speak. In addition, the UNPFII is situated as far up the UN hierarchy

that a human rights body can be, reporting to the UN Economic and Social Council. This means that the UNPFII sometimes privileges the voices of states. The United Nations—a body of peace and security—is first and foremost a member state’s body. Indigenous people were silenced from having their voices heard on the international playing field for a long time but now there is a place within the United Nations that will hear them. My time at the Forum taught me that support of this Forum and encouragement to participate is vital for positive change to be made and for the UNPFII to grow.

For anyone wanting to represent their people at the Forum my advice would be this: listen to the recommendations and issues of others and formulate solutions together, not against each other. Lobby the Rapporteur, even if your voice is not heard by ears, it will still be read and taken into account. Most importantly, such a forum will only

thrive with the support and respect of its members and those who support it.

This experience consolidated my dream to work at the United Nations in women’s rights and I will now further my studies and try and become the most capable person I can be because of the strength and resolve of the people I met at this Forum. My hope is to somehow be associated with the forum for the rest of my life because I believe wholly in what it represents; the voices of Indigenous people, a place where changes will be made for the betterment of people everywhere.

Aimee Ferguson was the assistant to Professor Megan Davis, State Elected Expert Permanent Forum Member and Forum Rapporteur, at the 2012 United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

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