



Voices for Change: Advocacy at the United Nations

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“Why do you do this work?”

The question came from the pastor of the youth group visiting the United Nations. The group had unknowingly arrived on the opening day of the Commission on the Status of Women—arguably one of the busiest days of the year at the United Nations in New York City. After navigating the long lines and throngs of people, we were finally together on the lower level of the UN. The pastor leading the group wanted to hear about the faith-based advocacy and work at the UN but said, maybe first, tell us: “Why do you do this work?”

I immediately thought of Nigeria and the women I had met in Kaduna.

During my first visit to Nigeria, I traveled alone by train on the “suicide road” from Abuja to Kaduna. I was meeting in the north with survivors of kidnapping and gender-based violence. We met in a simple, sparsely furnished room, the windows and doors open with hopes for a breeze to stir among the women sitting in the folding chairs loosely placed in a circle. Their colorful wrappers of African batik fabrics stood in contrast to the stark realities etched on their faces and in their eyes. They began, one by one, to share their experiences of assault and violence when they were kidnapped, many ripped from their homes in the middle of the night, forced on a march into the Nigerian bush, and held at gunpoint for months on end as the ransom was negotiated. Each story was followed by another even more horrific story telling of abuse, brutality, and gender-based violence amidst the continual insecurity in the country.

A solemn silence followed the personal accounts. The silence was followed by a conversation in traditional

Hausa. Finally, one woman, speaking for the group, said: “We want people outside of Nigeria to know what is happening here.” She hesitated then continued, “We know it is not safe, but we have nothing left to lose. We want to speak. Help us share our stories.”

Advocacy has been described as “telling stories for change.”

This is why I do what I do and why we as the United Church of Christ engage in advocacy at the United Nations: to bring grassroots voices and stories into the global spaces where decisions are made and to advocate for change while we hold accountable those who are making and carrying out policies.

We recognize that policy decisions affecting any and all individuals should never be made without the input of those most affected. Their stories are crucial and must form the basis for effective advocacy and engagement.

The voices from the survivors in Nigeria are joined by voices and stories from across the world: the Human Rights Defenders in Colombia fighting for land use in the territories, the young girl in Madagascar (representative of so many) given into marriage at age twelve because of her family’s poverty, the Marshallese who suffer the continuing medical impact of nuclear testing, reindeer herders in Finland whose livelihood is being destroyed by climate change, girls and women who suffer obstetric fistula when access to medical care could eradicate the problem.

We engage in advocacy because of the realities, the stories, the voices calling out for change. Calling for justice and an end to wars and violence, calling for development that is sustainable and cares for the planet, calling for gender equality and the eradication of gender-based violence, calling out for basic necessities, for access to housing, education, healthcare, and simply a safe place to sleep at night.

As long as there are voices to be heard, stories to tell, then we continue to advocate, to work and pray for change, to hold the vision of a Just World for All.

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Christ.

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