

## **Feminist Scholar-Activism Goes Global: Experiences of “Sociologists for Women in Society” at the UN**

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### **Abstract**

*This article focuses on the experiences and strategies of members of Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS) who strive to bridge the worlds of social activism and academia. It concerns the International Committee’s work at the United Nations (UN), specifically at the annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) meeting. It builds on transnational feminist literature that has discussed the UN as stage for a diverse global women’s movement and provider of global gender equality norms that, if utilized, advance gender equality in its member states. I analyze themes that emerged from a sample of in-depth interviews with current or former UN scholar-activists within SWS from a larger ethnographic study, and present experiences and challenges of SWS members’ engagement with UN politics and policy development since the mid-nineties. I demonstrate that SWS does justice to its mission of serving as an activist organization through its work in the global arena. Analysis of interviews, observations, and archival material demonstrates that SWS’s UN scholar-activism is increasing the visibility and applicability of feminist sociology. While this activism critically examines the discourse, it also disrupts hegemonic discourse and offers opportunities for concrete social change, particularly through linking activism, mentoring, and teaching.*

*Keywords: United Nations, Feminist Sociology, Global Feminism, Transnational Scholar-activism*

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*We talk all the time how do we blend the academy with activism, well there it is, the UN. That to me is the perfect blend. We are using our research knowledge, our academic background to promote women's equality... We don't only have the potential of having an impact on an issue in the US; we have the potential of having an impact on an issue worldwide.*

*Former UN delegate for SWS (I 16)*

Finding the “perfect blend” in work as described in the introductory quote, and advocating for social justice through action is the goal of many academics. It is inherent in a feminist approach to scholarly and educational work, which evolved out of its commitment to social change. Apart from scholar-activism on an individual level, the question arises if and how scholarly *organizations* can serve as an arena for global social change. (How) Can sociological networks address gender-related social problems on a global scale and utilize global governance structures such as the United Nations (UN) to shape gender equality discourse? This article takes Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS) as an example to tackle these questions, and interrogates opportunities and limitations for feminist scholar-activism around the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

The CSW in the UN is one of the oldest commissions of the UN, dedicated to the advancement and monitoring of gender equality among its currently 193 member states. Particularly in the last four decades, the UN has created important physical and virtual space for the evolution of a “global gender equality regime” (Kardam, 2004) that blossomed around the UN Women World Conferences since 1975 and that offers a vibrant platform for transnational social movements addressing gender and sexuality (Desai, 2005, 2009; Jain, 2005; United Nations, 2000). Around the annual meeting of the intergovernmental body of the CSW in the UN Headquarters in New York City a lively arena for agency has evolved that allows for transnational gender and sexuality rights advocates to network in parallel events and to attempt to shape the global gender equality agenda.

This article builds on transnational feminist literature that has discussed the UN as stage for a diverse global women’s movement and provider of global gender equality norms that, if utilized, advance gender equality in its member states. SWS as an organization seeks to shape these norms. I first contextualize SWS’ scholar-activism within the broader literature on transnational feminist theory and establish the organization as a pertinent case study for scholar-activism. I then briefly examine my methodology and unpack the history of SWS’ scholar-activism in and around the UN based on historic documents and publications. I then turn to the research site CSW and lay out themes that emerged from sub-sample of interviews with current or former SWS scholar-activists, representing experiences and challenges of SWS members’ engagement with UN policy development since the mid-nineties. I demonstrate that SWS does justice to its mission of serving as an activist organization through its work in the global arena. The activism of SWS-members increases visibility of feminist sociology, disrupts hegemonic discourse and offers opportunities for concrete social change, particularly through linking activism, mentoring, and teaching.

### **Theorizing a “Global” Women’s Movement? Some Tensions and Constraints**

In order to conceptualize SWS as a *global* actor of scholar-activism, as well as part of the *transnational* women’s movement, it is necessary to briefly delve into some theoretical considerations about these terms as derived from transnational feminist theory. For the last

two centuries, women have organized themselves in networks beyond the nation-state and have forged international and transnational ties (Hawkesworth, 2012; Rupp, 1997). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the UN has been an “unlikely godmother” (Snyder, 2006) of a “global women’s movement” (Antrobus, 2004). That usually refers to women’s mobilization of the past four decades around the UN’s International Women’s Decade, 1975-1985, and the series of UN world conferences in the 1990s around human rights, the environment, population, and social development, among others. Yet the term is problematic and highly contested (Desai, 2007b; Grewal, 1998). Feminists have criticized the notion of a “global women’s movement” because women’s voices are lumped together and sold as an artificial unified voice (Bergeron, 2001; Desai, 2002; Ferree & Tripp, 2006), and a flawed dichotomy of local/global is substantiated (Patil, 2011).

### **Interrogating “Global Feminism”**

Initially, the notion of “global feminism” was critical of the earlier notion of “global sisterhood” and its uncritical attachment to commonalities of women’s oppression around the world (Mohanty, 1991, 2003). Chowdhury (2006) argues that global feminism uses a universal human rights paradigm, and thus constructs for itself the role of the heroic, imperial savior, reminiscent of colonialist civilizing missions (Ferree & Tripp, 2006). Chowdhury (2006) suggests that we need to simultaneously undo race and nation, and interrogate not only international but also intra-national (within the U.S.) hierarchies to forge global gender equality. Walby (2011) makes the point that the UN is a global phenomenon. She thus uses “global feminism” when, and only when, she talks about organizations that utilize the UN or one of its bodies as context for activism. Along these lines, I argue that SWS is indeed part of a global women’s movement as it actively engages with the UN, the principal global policy-making body dedicated exclusively to gender equality and the advancement of women.

### **Critical Transnational Feminist Perspectives**

In response to the concept of global feminisms, critical transnational feminist perspectives emerged in the 1990s (Desai, 2015; Patil, 2011). Transnational feminist perspectives question a northern “missionary liberal feminism” (Hawkesworth, 2006) and address issues of imperialism, colonialism and development, while seeking out intersectional approaches to methodology and theory development (Falcón, 2016b). Transnational feminist perspectives have successfully questioned the constructions of women of the global South as “the other,” and elaborated on neo-colonial legacies and politico-economic inequalities (Falcón, 2016a).

### **SWS and Self-Criticality**

The research of some members of SWS continues to self-critically point out human rights violations in the US (Armaline, Glasberg, & Purkayastha, 2011), instead of pointing fingers to developing countries. Patil (2011) and Desai (2015) identify two canonical texts that have shaped transnational feminist theory: Alexander and Mohanty (1997) and Grewal and Kaplan (1994). Patil (2011) summarizes three key positions within feminist sociology in response to them: 1) moving beyond dichotomies of local versus global, bringing together gender and sexuality within post-colonial nationalism and state-building projects (Kim-Puri, 2005); 2) an emphasis on women’s agency and transnational organizing, building particularly via

international organizations (Desai, 2009; Naples & Desai, 2002); and 3) a focus on transnational networks and opportunity structures (Ferree, 2006; Moghadam, 2005). Most of this work, as well as the articles in a notable 2005 *Gender & Society* special issue on state and nation from a transnational feminist perspective (Kim-Puri, 2005) outline a transnational feminist perspective as theoretically interdisciplinary and as a political and activist project, emphasizing the interconnections between activism and academia.

### **SWS as a Bridge between the Academe and Activism**

SWS is a pertinent case to consider the bridge between academia and activism. It is an association of feminist sociologists from across the nation (and to a lesser extent the world). It was founded in 1970 as an activist organization with the goal to change sociology, yet it is also an academic organization. While SWS is concerned with the status of women in society, as reflected in its name, it started off as an organization that aimed to give women sociologists a platform for career development and support (Feltey & Rushing, 1998; SWS, 2013). It has evolved into an organization that continues these endeavors and has embraced engagement with transnational feminism from the start. SWS is a US-centric organization: It had 884 members as of October 2016, of which more than 95% are located in the United States (SWS, 2017). More than half of the members are on the SWS email listserv that serves as primary networking, information and support tool throughout the year (SWS, 2015).

SWS maintains a social action committee and understands itself as an activist feminist organization that is committed to social change *for* women in society. SWS facilitates activism through the email listserv, supporting local chapters in the US, media training for members, providing access to current research, e.g. fact sheets, and networking with other organizations and promoting members as experts in their research areas (Feltey and Rushing 1998, see also the website of SWS <http://www.socwomen.org>). Its members have contributed to campaigns and protests. They also have founded non-profit organizations, and served on boards of activist organizations (Feltey & Rushing, 1998; Risman, 2006).

### **Methods**

#### **Entrance and Multiple Roles in the Field**

I had been member of the International Committee of SWS since the onset of graduate school in 2007. I served as official UN delegate for SWS from 2009-2012 in the US; since 2015 I have served as SWS delegate to the CSW NGO Forum in Vienna, Austria. Accordingly, one aspect of my identity in the field is being an NGO-representative and scholar-activist. This role facilitates my access to the field sites through an official UN grounds pass. As a researcher I also collect data systematically during UN-related activities. In these blended roles I accompanied a UN field trip for students to CSW 53 as teaching assistant (Swider & Jauk, 2009), and observed the CSW 55 meeting in 2011, and the CSW 56 meeting in 2012.

In 2010, I was able to pursue a two-month internship in the fall of 2010 in the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW, now UN Women). These are open to graduate students of all disciplines. I secured an IRB approval from the University of Akron for what was now to become my dissertation project and used my 10-week internship for in-depth ethnographic

participant observation and informal field conversations documented by extensive field notes, documents, images, recorded events and memos from the rooms of the UN headquarters in New York City. I immediately made transparent my activist background and my interest in pursuing a dissertation project about the CSW towards my UN supervisor and my UN colleagues, with some of whom I recorded interviews. I have discussed my shifting and coexisting roles as insider and outsider in the field more extensively elsewhere (Jauk, 2014). The internship was the onset of my dissertation project, employing descriptive exploratory qualitative methodology.

### **Data Collection**

During all the CSW meetings and my internship at the UN headquarters in New York City I filled numerous research diaries, and typed out extensive fieldnotes most every evening during my field research drawing on field jottings and extensive photographic documentation. For my dissertation I additionally recorded, transcribed and analyzed 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews with UN staff members involved in the organizational logistics of the CSW, diplomats, country delegates, and gender activists working in and around the CSW. In Appendix B: Table 1, I provide an overview chart of data collection with timeline.

In this paper I primarily draw on a sub-sample of 11 interviews conducted with former or present SWS members who are, or have been, instrumental in SWS' work at the UN. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and via skype in the summer of 2012, transcribed verbatim and analyzed utilizing the software AtlasTI. I have de-identified and numbered the interviews (I1-I20). I identify who is talking when I quote verbatim in this paper with the numeric identifier and professional background if appropriate. Two of the participants were women who were instrumental in the process of getting consultative status for SWS in the late 1990s. Eight of the interviewed SWS members have at some point been elected as UN delegates. Four of the participants have been active in global feminist contexts beyond the UN. I supplement interview narratives with observation data, as well as systematic content analysis of SWS *Network News* articles (online on the SWS website since 2004; earlier relevant issues were kindly provided by Judith Lorber) as well as meeting minutes, documents, and letters that were forwarded to me by the SWS Executive Office and other SWS members. The content analysis helped me to identify a time line of the development and professionalization of the international work of SWS.

### **Data Analysis**

I adopted constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) as analytical strategy. Data was first coded in an open coding process, followed by several rounds of focused coding. Data analysis alternated with, as well as guided further data collection. For example, "SWS as activist organization" emerged as a theme only in 2011 when I worked as UN delegate for SWS. I wanted to find out about those women who served before me and made it possible for SWS to have access to the UN. I situate myself as feminist sociologist, with the understanding that there is no single feminist methodology, and no one correct feminist method, but "multiple feminist lenses" (Hesse-Biber, 2007a, p. 4). I used my own white,

western, working class, transnational feminist lens to examine the interview transcripts of feminist scholar-activists.

### **Research Trajectories and Decisions**

I started with the impetus to write a “herstory” of SWS' UN work and honor the “founding mothers” and instrumental activists over the years who have advanced SWS' activism in the global realm. As in all social research, data collection and analysis involves exclusion processes of those who could not or would not participate in the project. I agree with the participant who said, “What’s really amazing about the SWS and the international committee itself is that it isn’t just a few names, most of the people involved participate in that nurturing culture and if you don’t come in with it you learn it.” I have thus decided to focus on patterns not persons in this paper. For reasons of confidentiality I have de-identified direct quotes of participants. I use names in historical contexts when they appeared in a minimum of three different transcripts, which indicated to me that the scholar-activists are inter-subjectively established as leaders in a certain historical role by the subsample in my investigation. I turn now to the themes that emerged from this analysis.

### **Findings**

#### **Historical Background: Inception and Development of International Work within SWS**

“Talking to SWS about public sociology is like bringing coal to Newcastle” stated Michael Burawoy (2002, p. 1) in an address to the SWS constituency, referring to the activist agenda and working methods SWS strives to embrace as an organization. Many SWS members engage in public sociology, so much so that they are not only active as public sociologists in the US despite institutional barriers (Sprague & Laube, 2009) but have moved into the international and global realm as an arena of social activism (Desai, 2007c). Since its beginnings, some SWS members participated in transnational feminist networks. Some facilitated participation of SWS members in the series of UN Women’s Worlds Conferences, the World Social Forum, and many other outlets for transnational and global women’s movements. Two SWS members currently serve as representatives to the Department of Public Information (DPI) of the UN. The DPI’s function is to promote global awareness and greater understanding of the work of the United Nations. Currently, some 1500 NGOs are associated with the DPI (2016). The arena of the CSW became accessible because SWS was granted Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in July 1999. Five persons permanently serve as delegates to ECOSOC, yet most years as many as 20 SWS members and their students attend the CSW meetings.

The history of SWS’ involvement at the UN is interwoven with the New York Chapter of SWS. Also called the “Metropolitan Chapter,” it had been in existence since the beginnings of SWS in the 1970’s, and was a vibrant community of at times up to 25 women who came from around New York to monthly meetings, usually at a member’s home (Wartenberg, 1995). The meetings featured lectures, research presentations, book reviews, or guest speakers. According to one participant the chapter “died a kind of graceful death” and disbanded around 2006 because “most of the members were getting older, retired, and tired” (I12). The spark for organized international scholar-activism within SWS came from New

York members H. Hacker and A. Myers after they attended the UN Conference on Women in 1985 in Nairobi, Kenya. At the same time, J. Gordon became a UN representative for another organization in 1986.

By the mid 1990's international work had begun to take place within SWS systematically but on an informal basis. Some SWS members had been working with the UN as individuals, as representatives of other organizations, or even as SWS representatives, within the venue of the UN DPI by 1997/98. The 4<sup>th</sup> Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995, for which J. Lorber organized SWS side events, sparked a wave of professionalization in SWS' international work. She had set up the International Committee of SWS as Ad Hoc Committee 1994 – against some resistance – to facilitate SWS' involvement with the Beijing Conference and to create a place and a process to organize SWS' presence on the global scene. She saw the need to formalize and bundle insular global scholar-activism of members. Several SWS members represented SWS at the Huairou Forum adjacent to the formal UN conference in Beijing (SWS, 1995).

One way to connect the scholarly world of members with UN related activism was and remains *Network News*, the newsletter of the organization. The newly established International Committee committed itself from the start to report back to the organization in review meetings and in the newsletter. SWS representatives to the UN were mandated “to speak and vote in caucuses but for written statements or formal oral statements, representatives must get approval of the membership” (Lorber as cited in *SWS Network News* 1994, p. 12). Members of the New York chapter were also instrumental in lifting SWS' status to the “highest status we can get” (Gordon as cited in *SWS Network News* 1996, xiii, 5, p. 7).

In order for an organization to participate fully in it has to achieve “Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN” as a non-governmental organization (NGO), short: ECOSOC status. Eastwood (2006, p. 189) coined the term “intentional institutional capture” to denote processes by which practitioners translate their experiences and interests into something that is recognizable by the organization. Through achieving ECOSOC status SWS' experiences become recognizable to the UN and scholar-activism can take effective shape.

### **Formal Accreditation of SWS at the United Nations**

The application for ECOSOC status was started by New York chapter members E. Wolfson and completed with the help of I. Arafat, J. Skiles, and J. Gordon. D. Papademas agreed to serve as one of the first delegates, along with J. Gordon and J. Skiles. The “UN sub-committee” had many, fluctuating members over the years, but according to one early participant, “we did not have an agenda.” Some continuity was established through long-term members J. Skiles, D. Papademas, H. Raisz, R. Gallin, J. Gordon, J. Lorber, T. Smith, and M. Desai who are mentioned in the narratives and in documents as the biggest bearers of UN-knowledge. In recent years S. Lee, P. Ould and B. Katuna started to create manuals and literature on SWS' UN work to increase the visibility within SWS and the content of actual scholar-activism around the UN. Increasing UN visibility within the organization is essential, e.g. in order to keep and increase (travel) funding for UN delegates, and to effectively communicate and create the bridge between scholarship and activism in the global arena.

M. Desai was the first chair to divide the IC into three subcommittees: one consisting of scholar-activists around the UN, one consisting of scholars within the International Sociological Association (ISA), in particular the Research Committee 32, and thirdly, she initiated the Global Feminist Partnership program. This step expanded scholar-activism further by connecting SWS with overseas research centers and allowed for the development of context-specific expertise. UN scholar-activism underwent another surge of professionalization: The IC redefined the role of SWS in the UN and introduced staggered 3-year terms for delegates, in order for more experienced delegates to mentor new members (Desai, Fall 2005 IC report), a practice that has been honored and further developed by T. Smith (2007; 2008), M. Karides (2009), and M. Kim (2012) in their functions as IC chairs. It wasn't until 2011 that the IC had more applicants to serve as UN delegates than positions to be filled, "but before that, it was trying to find if anyone was willing to do this" states a former IC chair (I19). As SWS UN delegates have improved their internal communication in *Network News* and their operating structures over the years, UN work has become more attractive to SWS members, junior scholars as well as graduate students. The interest is perspicuous considering the perceived benefits of UN work to which I now turn.

### **The CSW: A Site for Feminist Scholar-Activism**

The site for SWS' feminist scholar-activism under consideration here is the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). It fostered its place in the UN system through the four World Women's Conferences (Reanda, 1999; Winslow, 1995). The members of the CSW convene annually in the UN Headquarters in New York for ten working days in late February, early March. CSW meetings involve delegates of member states of the UN, representatives of the UN-system, invited academic experts, and grassroots organizations which hold "parallel events" during the CSW meeting and utilize the convention to lobby delegates (for a detailed account how the CSW works see Jauk, 2012). In 2016 the NGO CSW committee which organizes this parallel conference on site received 550 applications for parallel events, of which 450 events were held in a 10 day period (NGO CSW 2016).

Since 1996 the outcome of the annual meetings is a document called "Agreed Conclusions" on one or more priority themes. It constitutes policy guidelines for all member states that are crafted in formal and informal meetings (For a history of the CSW see United Nations and Boutros-Ghali 1996 and United Nations 2006). In the core of the CSW are the negotiations of the member states that take place mostly behind closed doors. Delegates from all countries negotiate paragraph by paragraph for the Agreed Conclusions. The facilitator of the meetings can allow NGOs to observe this process, and SWS delegates have taken advantage of this opportunity to "learn how the UN works, comma by comma, period by period" (I18). SWS delegates perceived the "watchdog" position as rewarding, and appreciated the chance to open this learning opportunity to students. This international stage enables a specific view also on one's country. One delegate remembered "people very politely listening to the delegates from Syria or other countries..., that ordinarily the United States doesn't want to talk to. But here we [*note of author*: i.e. the US] respect and are listening to the opinions of the women from all over world" (I20). The quote also demonstrates the experience of empowerment as feminist scholar-activist, as the setting opens communication channels with representatives from nation states.

### **Alive and Thriving: Global Feminist Scholar-Activism**

SWS fulfills its role at the UN through participation at the meetings and in recent years through the submission of written statements to the CSW (see Appendix A for list of statements). It also organizes parallel events, which has increased the visibility of SWS at the UN and marks an improvement in intentional institutional capture. Parallel events are a way to bridge the scholar-activist divide and enter into intense exchange with other scholar-activists and policy makers. On March 5, 2012, M. Desai, S. Hamal Gurung and K. Kelly shared their research under the title “Feminist Sociological Insight on Literacy Projects, Community Grassroots Groups, and Rural Women's Leadership.” I noted in my field notes that

About 70 women (and some men) are crammed into the small stuffy presentation room in the Church Center, some had to stand, and some were sitting on the floor at points, because there were no free chairs. Right after the presentation eight women are lining up at the front desk of the SWS panelists, six of them hold paper and pen in their hands to note contact details, most others are rushing out of the room to other sessions in the tight parallel event schedule. (Excerpt from Fieldnotes March 5<sup>th</sup> 2012)

Several attendees stated that they were attracted by the word “feminist” in the title of the session, a word not common at the CSW (Jauk et al., 2012). Further SWS parallel events at the CSW took place on March 15, 2013 (“Feminist Responses to Violence Against Women and Girls”); March 19, 2015 (“Feminist Sociological Perspectives: Gender-Based Violence and the Continued Struggle for Equality in a Post 2015 Agenda”), and March 22, 2016 (“Feminist Sociological Research & Economic Sustainability: Local, National, and Global Insights.”).

In recent years impact and visibility of UN work increased through the documentation of processes (most credited in this regard are the IC chairs M. Desai, M., M. Kim, and S. Lee) and the written statement (most credited activists are S. Lee and B. Katuna). The written statement is a formal 1500-word document that will be translated into the five UN languages and published with the official documentation of the CSW meeting on the UN website. Based on SWS scholarship and UN-reports (i.e. “agreed language”) the statements are manifest outlets of feminist scholar-activism. They internally served as common denominators for SWS’ lobby-work in the different action-arenas of briefings, caucuses, and interactions with country delegates and UN-system members. The written statement gains impact only through actual communication and lobbying work, as this SWS delegate explains:

It was very satisfying to me, the year that the priority goal was women's education we had submitted a paper about education, ...[.]...I didn't get to ask the question at the briefing but at the end of briefing I went up to the delegate I told her I was from SWS and I gave her a copy of the paper and I talked to her about the language and I gave her that slip of paper. She said, “I absolutely agree with you that language is missing, it needs to be in there.” And when the document came out the language was there. And that to me it was so satisfying to feel like “Wow, I had some role in doing that!” (I16)

“Transformative,” “thrilling,” “exciting,” “inspiring,” “exhilarating” are the words used to describe SWS delegate’s work and activism around the UN. It is personal inspiration,

connecting with other women from around the globe, and the embodied experience of the learning that SWS UN delegates mention most often in their narratives as payoffs of their work. Some see synergies between the UN and SWS that coincide with goals and methods of feminist scholar-activists: “Maybe [it is] because we're academic but there's an attraction to institutionalized forums like this,” as one scholar-activist speculates why the bureaucratic mire of the UN even evokes positive emotions in some. The UN context as symbolic to overcome social, cultural, and geographical boundaries and the embodied experience of collective action was stressed in other narratives.

### **Alive and Learning: Education Through Transnational Feminist Connections**

Making connections to other women was by far the benefit most emphasized by SWS delegates. A sense of empowerment, solidarity and hope is expressed in every narrative of my sample. The connections made with women are also shared with students. CSW involvement does not only impact one's research but also quality and opportunities in teaching. One senior faculty member and former UN delegate observed:

I have made some connections...I've met some of the women from some of the African NGOs are just remarkable...I have gone to some of the side events and just really had a great experience...I connected some of my students with some of these NGOs because part of their project was to find an NGO that was working on an issue that they had identified for the country they were studying. I was able to connect them directly with the people in the organization. (I16)

There is particular benefit of SWS scholar-activism for graduate students. Several graduate students have utilized SWS' global activism for their dissertation research (Jauk, 2013; Smith, 2008). Students can connect with senior scholars through common activism. It is a way to “make [your] name recognizable” (I15) as a student notes, and an opportunity to collaborate without pressure to publish. While early delegates identify as “self-taught global activists” (I10) and “made the road by walking (I18);” later generations benefitted from intergenerational mentoring. A delegate of the first years says: “I think because I am one of the first UN reps, we were all learning together. Most of my colleagues were senior, but in terms of work with the UN we were all kinda learning together (I15).” Later more *Network News* articles were available, and S. Lee created a working document with the title “Lessons Learned” that was passed on to newer delegates and explained the CSW in nontechnical language, as well as how to get around. One delegate explains her initial reactions and her experience of mentoring within SWS:

I just remember feeling so overwhelmed and so scared like I should turn around and run ...There was this sharing of knowledge and I feel that it is really important that they don't make you feel stupid...the whole process of being a UN rep really relied on that passive knowledge of one generation of women to the next. (I10)

It is clear in the narrative that intergenerational mentoring was crucial for this SWS scholar-activist to stay and grow in UN involvement. Yet there are also challenges to scholar-activism around the UN to which I now turn.

### Challenges of SWS' Global Feminist Public Sociology at the UN

Effective global activism in the realm of the UN is “a question of reconnaissance, somebody has to have the time to ferret out the place where SWS can make a mark, a small one but a significant one and build from there but it does take personnel, the time, and some funding (I18);” says a former IC chair. Along these lines constraints of time and money have defined SWS scholar-activism. This finding is consistent with research on scholar-activism more generally (Hale, 2008; Sprague & Laube, 2009), and marks a significant difference to other NGOs around the UN. Historically, SWS scholars in the NYC area attended UN meetings because they have “deluxe access” (I17) to the UN due to their geographical proximity to the UN Headquarters. SWS UN delegates are “volunteer representatives” (I17) and different from full-time paid activists of better-resourced NGOs. According to one SWS delegate “there are a lot of people involved as NGOs at the UN, who are just wealthy women who find this an interesting thing to do and they spend all their time there...It's hard when you're not funded to do it and you are trying to catch the attention of people in your spare time (I18).” Travel costs are an issue that needs to be addressed by the organization to ensure participation by scholar-activists across the nation.

The lack of funds in turn may illustrate privilege, as a delegate shares: “It made me more sympathetic to what third world women are going through because it takes a high level of top resource time and money to actually be able to go to these things” (I16). That also points to one of the major challenges discussed in SWS' literature and the narratives represented here: differences *between* women. A delegate speaks for several SWSers when she locates a “competition at the UN amongst groups as there are a couple of more powerful well established women's organizations who get picked as the lead organizations (I15).” This experience has also been translated into critical transnational feminist research (Desai, 2007a, 2007b; Naples & Desai, 2002).

Investing time and personal funds into SWS activism often means divesting resources from other professional activities that are valued in the academic reward system. Some participants shared that their departments were not particularly supportive of SWS in general, much less so of UN work. For some this was the reason they could not continue their role as UN delegates. In their research on feminist public sociology, Sprague and Laube (2009) asked a larger sample of SWS members for the institutional arrangements that make doing public sociology difficult. They found two related institutional barriers: the culture of professional sociology and the standards used for evaluating scholarship. Formal evaluation practices place significant emphasis on the prestige of the publication outlet and quantity of publications. Public sociology takes time, resulting in fewer publications.

Along these lines some UN delegates' work is made possible by institutional support from their departments for the benefit of SWS and future generations of scholar-activists. One delegate explains:

I think part of the problem in doing the international work...is getting people who are interested in it and willing to give the time. Part of difference that I make is that I was willing to do that. Now in a way I probably wasn't producing as many publications as I might have done. It took away from some of the other professional work that I might have been doing. I am not in a department that really puts a lot of pressure on me to publish, publish, publish. They like the idea that I was involved in the UN. But it did take a lot of time. I was always amazed by how much time it took. (I14)

Another dimension of institutional support is the support within SWS, which some members perceive as suboptimal. In recent years SWS dedicated some funds to the IC which are spent towards the parallel event as well as partial reimbursements for UN delegates.

A further challenge is the high turnover not only among SWS delegates but also within the UN system. D. Papademas as well as J. Skiles were able to meet with the director of DAW (Division for the Advancement of Women) on different occasions, and other SWS delegates confirmed that SWS was “recognized” in its scholar-activist beginnings in the UN. A high turnover among UN staff and a relatively young retirement age (at 60) made it difficult to maintain professional relationships. Also, predominantly lower level staff is designated to deal with the NGOs around the CSW meetings. Another delegate shares that she was successful in approaching actual U.S. country delegates, yet remained unconvinced about the level of influence they may have on actual proceedings after the conversation: “The man was nice, but he was kind of just sitting at the desk, to make sure there was a U.S. person at the desk. I do not think he had too much influence in U.S. policy.” (I14). During my UN internship I observed that often interns are being sent to CSW meetings “just to have a body in the chair” as an employee from a European Mission stated, speaking to the lower value attached to gender topics as well as a strategic evasion of conversations with NGOs.

Scholarship by SWS members has significantly shaped our understanding of gender as a plural and fluid category over the last decades. One challenge thus is that the UN operates with a binary gender system that has become too narrow for most feminist sociologists. SWS has specifically tried to open up the gender understanding in its written statement of 2013 in that it addressed violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals as an issue to be taken seriously at the level of the CSW. The effort to include related language in the outcome document in this regard failed. The recurrent failure of intergovernmental bodies to recognize multiple genders and sexualities has been widely discussed in the literature (Bedford, 2010; Buss & Herman, 2003). Some SWS scholars thus suggest transgressing the limitations of the UN and investing in grassroots organizations and expanding to other forums such as the World Social Forum. One former UN delegate who now is involved in World Social Forum emphasizes the need to collaborate with more radical grassroots organizations questioning gender and to put “our money where our mouth is” (I19) as a “superrich” organization. Other SWS members have dedicated their research to the liberal and colonial bias of the UN (Falcon, 2016a, Patil, 2009), as well as the reproduction of a missionary white feminism that gets reproduced through the ways in which the UN conceives gender (Desai, 2007b).

SWS is marginalized in the UN system because it is an NGO vis-a-vis the power apparatus of nation states, but also because the size of its comparatively small constituency, and the lack of paid full time activists. The UN itself is male-centered and male-dominated. A 2010 report shows that the representation of women in the UN slightly increased from 38.4 per cent in 2007 to 39.9 per cent in 2009, but women comprise less than a third (28.4 per cent) of the three highest professional ranks (United Nations, 2010). Since its inception in 1945 there has never been a female Secretary General. Women-related units are underfunded and less respected within the UN system (Miller, Razavi, & United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 1998; Sandler & Rao, 2012). SWS is part of what one SWS activist calls the “other” UN which is “the UN of volunteers, and the Civil Society movement people...we are there on a fuzzy marginalized voluntary basis. We do not have any formal

power in the UN” (I17). SWS in this light is only one “tiny little NGO” (I18). so “making a big mark is unrealistic” (I20).

As a professional association of feminist sociologists SWS is not pushing a narrow agenda. A majority of delegates suggest that SWS can make its limitation its strength and continue to influence UN language and processes instead on a *broad* range of issues through events and statements. Further ideas of UN scholar-activism are creation of thematic bibliographies, but also using UN publishing opportunities to lift SWS work into visibility among UN practitioners. Some delegates have recently joined and promoted cross cutting initiatives like “Toward a More Feminist UN” (ICRW 2017). Also, the involvement in UN events of SWS’ global research partner institutes has increased over the past years. This also involves funding for the partners to come to CSW meetings and present their work.

### Conclusion

Building on the work of Feltey and Rushing (1998), who conceptualized SWS as an arena for social change, I explore feminist scholar-activism within SWS as a venue for agency in an age of globalization. I argued that as feminist scholars, activists, mentors, and teachers SWS members offer constructive critique in and around UN policy construction. The UN also provides a field for feminist scholar activists to provide education for various actors, but also to simulatenously extend and improve own educational environments through connections and transnational feminist networking.

First, activism at the UN increases visibility and applicability for feminist sociology. The UN is a public outlet for SWS scholars to present research through parallel events and in research briefs in the form of written statements to the CSW. Some SWS scholars work with the UN in their individual capacity as consultants and sociologists. At all of these occasions feminists scholars offer education for country delegates, UN staff members, fellow NGO activists and other stakeholders. As UN delegates, SWS members are increasing the visibility of SWS not only at the United Nations but also in the scholarly community. Participants shared that they have or are presenting their UN work in the context of SWS to other (international) sociology associations “to keep making SWS's work as visible as I can within our professional arena” (I 17).

Second, scholar-activists do not only identify disparities in the UN discourse but actively disrupt it. With the critical transnational feminist lens, the UN is a global construct in which states are reconfigured, as the diplomatic missions to the UN reproduce the imaginary dichotomy of monolithic nation states vis a vis a virtual global civil society. Yet members of SWS disrupt this discourse with scholarly work and with educational feminist interventions on site. Recognizing that the UN is a critical vehicle for transnational feminist organizing since the 1990s, there is also critical awareness of profound differences and hierarchies between women in terms of who can participate in UN meetings due to wealth, education, and geopolitical location (Desai, 2002, 2005, 2007a; Naples, 2002) and emerging methodological strategies to address this intersectional inequality (Falcón, 2016) and the hegemonic and colonial logic of development and human rights that has been purported by UN actors (Suárez-Krabbe, 2016).

Third, even though the gender equality regime (Kardam 2004) built around the UN is a set of primarily discursive and symbolic commitments made by governments with very little actual commitment of resources, women’s movements have used these symbolic

commitments to achieve victories at local levels (Desai, 2007b). “The larger question is whether society has changed as a result of the work of SWS,” ask Feltey and Rushing (1998: 224). They conclude that the fact that SWS has practiced a combination of liberal politics (professional advancement) alongside an active radical political agenda has kept SWS viable over time, but it is questionable how the power gained within the academy can be translated into actual social change. SWS scholar activists lead the way in showing how to utilize international agreements locally, for example by urging to move forward the ratification of CEDAW (Lee, 2010). UN involvement also internationalized research agendas of members (Bose 2006).

Last but not least, it is the multidimensional implications of the the UN as a tool and target for education that make it interesting for scholar activists of various backgrounds. As the narratives show, being a feminist scholar-activist in the context of the UN creates opportunities for one’s own education, as well as for one’s teaching and mentoring practice as it opens up a space of international networks and contacts in the NGO arena as well as to political and intergovernmental stakeholders. It is possible in this space to promote one’s research but also to connect students to different lifeworlds and sometimes also to concrete internships and research sites. Another important facet of this work is of course the opportunities to educate through research based events, particularly in the framework of parallel events around the CSW but also as potential speakers and panelists for preparatory expert groups.

Sprague and Laube (2009) believe that “sociology as a discipline has an ethical obligation to engage in public sociology (We have and will continue to develop knowledge that could help improve the lives of others and remedy serious social ills)” (p. 267). Besides this ethical obligation there are manifold personal and potentially professional benefits in bridging scholar-activism barriers, as the narratives of SWS members show. A feeling of accomplishment outside academia can be achieved. Bonding across barriers of location, ethnicity and geopolitics is possible and inspires research as well as teaching. The narratives and examples clearly show that scholar-activism holds benefit for scholarship, teaching and activism and that these realms often cannot be separated. This paper then is a call for a deeply feminist BOTH/AND approach to scholar-activism, an embracing to be and remain academic AND activist, advocating and teaching for equity, justice and action on many levels on a multidimensional feminist path to social justice.

### **Authors Note**

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## Appendix A: Important Notes

*List of Abbreviations*

CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
DAW	Division for the Advancement of Women
DESA	Division for Economic and Social Affairs
DPI	Department of Public Information
INGO	International Nongovernmental Organization
IC	International Committee (of SWS)
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NGO CSW/NY	NGO Committee on the Status of Women (office New York City)
UN	United Nations
SWS	Sociologists for Women in Society

*SWS statements submitted to the CSW*

Statement submitted CSW 54/2010, E/CN.6/2010/NGO/31,  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing15/documentation.html>

Statement submitted CSW 55/2011, E/CN.6/2011/NGO/20,  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw55/documentation.htm>

Statement submitted CSW 56/2012, E/CN.6/2012/NGO/54,  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw56/documentation.htm>

Statement submitted CSW 57/2013, E/CN.6/2013/NGO/48  
[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.6/2013/NGO/48](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.6/2013/NGO/48)

Statement submitted to CSW/58/2014, E/CN.6/2014/NGO/127  
[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.6/2014/NGO/127](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.6/2014/NGO/127)

Statement submitted to CSW 59/2015, E/CN.6/2015/NGO/132  
[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.6/2015/NGO/132](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.6/2015/NGO/132)

Statement submitted to CSW 60/2016, E/CN.6/2016/NGO/5  
[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.6/2016/NGO/5](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.6/2016/NGO/5)

Statement submitted to CSW 61/2017, E/CN.6/2017/NGO/14  
<http://undocs.org/E/CN.6/2017/NGO/14>

## Appendix B: Table 1

*Overview chart of data collection*

Time	Data Collection	Type of data
03/2009	Observation of CSW 53 meeting in role as teaching assistant and SWS delegate	Images, research diary, report
10/2010 - 11/2010	Ethnographic fieldwork during internship in UN Headquarters	Field notes, documents and reports, images, research diary, recorded events and memos
03/2011	Participant Observation of CSW 55 meeting	
03/2012	Participant Observation of CSW 56 meeting	Full verbatim transcripts
10/2010 - 03/2012	Interviews with UN staff, diplomats, and country delegates, n=9	
03/2012 - 10/2012	Interviews with (former) UN delegates of SWS, n=11	Documents, newsletters, protocols
07/2012 - 10/2012	Archival SWS records	
Since 06/2016	Participant Observation of CSW NGO Forum in Vienna, Austria	Field notes, documents and reports, images, research diary, recorded events and memos