

Report on Global Women's Summit for the Nobel Women's Initiative

June 2009

The Global Women's Summit¹ is an annual gathering of 1000 or more business women and political leaders from around the globe. This year it took place in Santiago de Chile and was hosted by President Bachelet. There was a large delegation from China (next year's host), and a surprisingly good number from Africa as well as everywhere else. The executives came from all industries, from heavy industry to media, from cosmetics to computers. Most were very senior in their chosen field and there were many CEOs present. There were also a large number of women political figures.

I was accompanied by Jody Williams² (who was attending her first ever business conference) and had been invited to speak on a special panel on the final day entitled Violence Against Women. I was curious to see how this topic, more usual for the agendas of the Nobel Women's Initiative, would be received in the more formal atmosphere of a business conference. I was also keen to see if I could detect a shift in the discussions amongst business people following on from the economic crises.

The topics in the first two days covered a lot of ground from global megatrends affecting all business through to microfinance initiatives in developing (and developed) countries; from the portrayal of women in the media to women entrepreneurship; Investment funds to Corporate Responsibility.

Day three was time for Jody's panel on violence against women. She was speaking first in a panel consisting of Hon. Patricia Espinosa Torres, the Under Secretary of the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, Mexico; Hon. Laura Albornoz, Minister for Women's Affairs, Chile; Susan Heaney, Global Director for Corporate Responsibility, Avon Products and the panel was moderated by Ralitsa Vassileva a news anchor from CNN International.

Jody gave a very personal, moving and funny account of how her understanding of the definition of violence against women had evolved over the years. Speaking in a mixture of Spanish and English to pay tribute to our Chilean hosts, Jody wove a narrative spanning from her early years up to today and the audience sitting in this conference. She had started with a very narrow understanding that violence against women meant rape. Then over the course of her years as an activist she had begun to realise that violence could be political; it could be domestic; it could be social. In fact any words or deeds that sought to suppress the needs or rights of women are a form of violence. And as such that violence is to be found not only in the streets or the combat zones of the world but also in the offices, factories and board rooms that today's audience found themselves in every day. She ended by providing some concrete examples of what women in the corporate sector could do to promote a fairer world for women. These actions included getting informed about the real situation in certain hotspots through signing up to the NWI quarterly newsletter. In their corporate roles women could ask for full stakeholder reports that include a specific impact on women study, to be presented alongside any proposals for new investments considered by their companies; Women can also push for direct action on campaigns such as the fight to free Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's 2000 political prisoners. A handout of actions was given to all the women present and can be seen in the notes at the end.

Jody received the only standing ovation at the conference. Following her must have been a daunting task. But in fact Ministers Albornoz and Espinosa Torres did amazing jobs of showing what actions the Chilean and Mexican governments were taking to eradicate violence against women in their countries. They were then followed in their turn by Susan Heaney from Avon, who gave an exemplary account of how companies can use their power and their influence to be forces for good in their markets. Avon is now managed by women (85% of managers are female including the CEO) and was founded on the principles of empowering women through financial independence, providing a flexible way for women to make money selling cosmetics door to door in their communities. That ethos has continued to be a driving force behind what Avon does and their most recent initiative is a campaign against domestic violence which is being run in over 50 countries.

There were other hopeful signs too. Throughout the conference it was reiterated that the only sustainable way out of violence for women was financial independence. There was also much evidence of the recent rise in women entrepreneurs. Women now start more businesses than men and they grow them more quickly.

Secondly the fact that a topic such as Violence Against Women was even included in a business summit showed a clear commitment on the part of the business community that violence, in all its forms, matters to them. This was matched by increasing evidence of companies fulfilling their wider societal role as forces for good in their communities through Corporate Responsibility programmes embedded into the way the company thought and acted. There were excellent presentations on the sustainability agenda of the world's biggest retailer WalMart, by Esther Silver Parker, their SVP of Corporate Affairs; and by Maud Pagel of Deutsche Telekom on the enlightened programmes run by the German telcoms giant to encourage social inclusion among young immigrant women in Germany.

Overall I felt there had been a shift in the consciousness of companies, (or at least of their representatives present at the conference), towards a more sustainable and socially responsible corporate agenda. The discussions of "Corporate Responsibility" felt less like marketing hype and more like thoughtful determination than in recent years. The standing ovation Jody received was a clear indication that there is a great need and desire on the part of the corporate world to do a better job, NGOs can be instrumental in supporting that.

Notes:

1. Global Women's Summit states its mission as "the nexus at which all sectors – public, private and nonprofit – would come together under the common vision of dramatically expanding women's economic opportunities globally through exchanges of working solutions and creative strategies forged by women leaders in different parts of the world. It is a business Summit, whose 'business' focus is women's advancement in the global economy."
Political leaders attending the 2009 conference included President Bachelet of Chile, Vice President of Vietnam, Minister of Justice of Peru and the deputy Mayor of Beijing. More information can be found at <http://globewomen.org/summit/Summit.htm>
2. Jody Williams served as the founding coordinator of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) until February 1998. Together the ICBL and Jody were honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997. Jody is a founding member of the Nobel Women's Initiative www.nobelwomensinitiative.com

“WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP”

Things you can do to ensure your company is a force for good for all stakeholders, not just shareholders; for men and for women

1. **Stay informed – www.nobelwomensinitiative.org - Sign up for NWI news letter. Make a donation.**
2. **Are you a senior executive or non executive board member in an organization?:**
 - Has your company adopted Corporate Responsibility policies in accordance with UN Global Compact or other internationally agreed standards?
www.unglobalcompact.org
 - Does your company have procedures for evaluating and following up on such policies?
 - At a management or board meeting when investments in new products or countries are being discussed; or a country about which you are unsure of stakeholders standards, ask for a **full stakeholder impact study** including:
 - i. The country’s overall record on women’s rights
 - ii. The likely impact of your business on women in that country
 - Do any proposed business plans adhere to 1) company codes of responsibility, accountability etc.? 2) global codes such as UN Global compact? How do you ensure compliance? And how is this audited?
 - If you are in situations where it is sensitive to raise the “women’s” perspective, you can always approach it from a risk, compliance or cost perspective. Investors increasingly ask. The risks of non compliance are huge and the cost to the business can be great.
 - **Overall - ensure whatever decisions are made, are made following full discussion of the impact on women.**
3. **Be aware of your own actions and decision making impact on a daily basis. Your behaviour is a model for others, make it count.**

“OTHER SUPPORTIVE ACTIONS FOR WOMEN IN THE CORPORATE SECTOR”

1. **Government contacts:**
Press government contacts, Foreign Ministry contacts, to create a standing fund for women’s rights, following the Dutch example www.mdg3.nl

2. **International negotiations:**
Echo Stephen Lewis’ call for states and agencies not to provide funding or resources for peace negotiations that do not have women as leading participants at the table (setting the agenda or with real seat at the table). From his recent speech: “First, the United States should refuse to fund or support any UN-sponsored peace negotiations that do not have women as leading participants at the table.”

3. **Are you involved in a conflict zone?:**
For those companies with operations on the ground in conflict zones, insist on meeting with representatives of women’s organizations and getting their assessment of the impact of your business on women’s rights in their country.

4. **Human rights**
Speaking out for female human rights defenders who are under threat. Sign petitions or join campaigns that support their work (e.g. support for Shirin Ebadi).

5. **Are you involved in Sudan:**
For those companies active in Sudan, engage with the Government of Sudan about humanitarian access in Darfur, ceasefire, and women at the peace tables.

6. **Freedom for political prisoners such as Aung San Su Kyi in Burma**
Press for freedom for Aung San Su Kyi and other political prisoners in Burma. If possible go to Burma to visit her, urge your Foreign Minister to raise the issue in the South East Asian region. Join campaigns that call for the release of political prisoners e.g., sign the petition to Free Burma’s Political Prisoners Now before the 24th May at www.fbppn.net

7. **Use your brand name to push for change:**
Join with other corporate leaders to press for Aung San Suu Kyi’s freedom in a public forum, at speaking events or in your marketing communications. For an example of this see Fiat Lancia’s groundbreaking ads for the Delta car that called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi.

The Nobel Women’s Initiative can help you with more information on any of the above issues. Please visit www.nobelwomensinitiative.com