

## Reflections from Rio+20 part 1: “Women working in development organizations are not allowed to be feminists”



*In this post, Caitlin Fisher talks about the Rio+20 conference held in June 2012. She talks about the status quo she experienced in the discourse and retells a meeting with a development professional she met on a bus. This post is the first one out of two. The second one can be found [here](#).*

This past June I attended the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, better known as **Rio+20**, in Rio de Janeiro Brazil. It marked the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio-92) and was supposed to serve as a milestone event in defining the future sustainable development agenda.

Like many, I was extremely disappointed by the event. However, I was particularly disappointed with respect to the gender and development discourse and the integration, or lack thereof, of the gender agenda. The discourse was more of the same tiresome rhetoric and hollowed out buzzwords. ‘Empowerment’ and ‘sustainability’ seem to have lost all meaning, entering in one ear and out the other—of everyone. The **rights-based agenda**, which advocates for the empowerment of women as an end in itself, appears to have slid off the table as we increasingly instrumentalize women’s roles, throwing responsibility onto them to protect our environment and save our world. Essentialized depictions of women as ‘reproducers’ ‘carers’, ‘nurturers’, ‘vulnerable victims’, and potential ‘saviors’ of the environment were rampant.

It was the same discourse with the same women. We are talking amongst ourselves and we are once again talking predominantly about *women*, as opposed to gender in terms of the socially constructed relations between men and women. I must say that the new nomenclature of the UN Women initiative is not helping this situation. (I am of the opinion that the UN Women, as an arm within the UN, should be serving more as a mediating and monitoring body for the integration of a comprehensive approach to gender across its departments, as opposed to calling itself out and somewhat removing itself from the larger picture by creating its own events, initiatives, and programs.)

This mind-numbing gender discourse, and wider negotiations for that matter, reflected the environment in which they were housed. The event took place at the isolated Rio Centro, which was both physically and emotionally removed from the creative energy of the city. On the western outskirts of Rio, the Centro oozed a staleness and a stifling dehumanized feeling. The atmosphere made me feel empty and ignited my cravings to be at the lively People’s Summit (Cupula do Povo) taking place downtown. The Athlete’s Park, which sat next to Rio Centro and hosted a series of open side events, was even worse. There were people walking around and filling the tents, but the space felt abandoned—abandoned of human life. Logos of corporate sponsors flanked the tents and there was this underlying commercial feeling, like you were supposed to buy something. Perhaps that was because you were. You were supposed to buy the idea that business as usual is moving us towards the more sustainable ‘future that we want’ (which became the title of Rio+20 outcome document).

Nevertheless, amidst this barrenness there were some small pockets of hope and inspiration that did shine through, and they came in the form of several moments over the course of the week that deeply impacted me and my thinking. One of those moments was a conversation I had on the bus one morning with a woman in a senior role at the United Nations (UN).



We boarded the Rio+20 buses outside Copacabana beach and got ready for the two-hour journey out to the Rio Centro. I sat down next to a woman who looked to be in her late fifties. She was intensely scrolling through the emails on her smart phone. I waited until she put the phone down and then turned and asked her what organization she was from. She turned to me, slightly awkwardly, slightly curtly, and with a thick German accent said, ‘The UN’ and then quickly turned away. I nodded and continued, ‘What do you do there?’ She informed me of her specific role. She turned away again and we sat silently. After a somewhat awkward pause, she turned her head slightly, but didn’t make eye contact, and said ‘And you?’ I told her that I was helping out with an NGO working on global island partnerships at the Rio Centro, but I that gender and sustainability was my field. As soon as I said the word gender, her head perked up and she cracked a smile of interest.

From there, our conversation unfolded into the most amazing hour and half-long feminist discussion. She told me that all the decisions at the UN are still made by men, and all the glory goes to them. “Women were allowed to have the environment branch within the UN when environment was marginalized as an unimportant field, but in 1992 when the environment became an important global agenda issue, the men took it back and got rid of the women in positions of power”, she told me, adding that, “It is hard, I have been fighting this the whole way, my whole career, the same story”.

“I didn’t have children, but I have a niece and I look at her work-life situation and it makes me upset”, she continued. “She is living at home with her small child and her husband at work and the system does not let her work. The conservative government in her country has cut back on state childcare, so she cannot work a full-time job. Flex-time is fine, but I would not hire a woman in a high level position if she can only work a couple days a week—she will never be able to build her career up at part-time; she will have to stay lower down on the ladder as long as she is not full time. We fought so hard before and made headway, and now with backlash, we are like, ‘What was that all for if this is where we are?’” I nodded my head the whole way through. I know.

After we connected on a feminist level, she had loosened up and felt more comfortable talking to me. She talked about her experiences and her general feelings about the Rio+20 event. She was at Rio 1992 and said that it had had much more energy, innovation and passion than this summit. “People were buzzing in 1992” she explained, “but this time they are not”, noting part of the problem to be the prevalence of empty rhetoric by speakers at this event). It was reassuring to hear this senior-level UN professional, who had been involved in all of the high level negotiations leading to the Rio+20 outcome document ([‘The Future We Want’](#)), felt the same way I did.

She continued by telling me the details of the Rio+20 referendum that was passed on the ‘The Future We Want’ document the day prior. It was 49-pages long and many principles from 1992’s [Agenda 21](#) were reinforced. Social and human development language was incorporated she noted, with a slight rise in her voice, but she continued by stating that it was rather buzzwordy, especially with the pervasiveness of the word ‘sustainable development’, which now, present in *everything*, has come to mean nothing. She said it looks as though no countries are going to touch the document when the heads of state arrive tomorrow for the closed final meetings and that the nations are going to agree to it as is, which she was surprised about.

Later that day, following this conversation, I had a revelation as I walked through the conference center to a side panel. As I looked at the heads of people buried in their smartphones, moving around robotically, I realized something: They don’t want this! It was an epiphany. These people don’t want this either—this is not human. These robotic human bodies, slaves to the Neoliberal system, want the energy and connections that the others are feeling at the Culpula People’s Summit downtown where I had spent the previous weekend, and where the truth to sustainable development sits. But they are trapped here and don’t know how to get out, or don’t know that they want to get out.

Read the second post [here](#).



**Caitlin Fisher** is a Cambridge, Massachusetts native who captained Harvard women’s soccer team and played professionally in Brazil, Sweden and the United States. She completed her MSc at the Gender Institute, LSE in 2010 and co-founded the **GUERREIRASPROJECT**. She is now doing further research for the **GUERREIRASPROJECT** on gender, economic development, and sustainability as a Fulbright Fellow in Brazil. She recently delivered this **TED** talk in São Paulo.

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