



## US Women's Caucus at the UN

### What Are The Agreed Conclusions?

**The UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) has a job to do every March:** The member states have to negotiate an international agreement called the Agreed Conclusions.

- This important document establishes global norms of behavior that UN member states expect one another to follow in their policies towards women and girls.
- Even though the Agreed Conclusions are not as strong as international law like the CEDAW treaty - that is legally binding for countries that have acceded to it and they can be held accountable in court - the Agreed Conclusions nonetheless carry significant weight as negotiated, affirmed, and written international expectations.
- The Agreed Conclusions are respected because governments typically want to look good in the eyes of the "international community" - other UN member states and UN bodies like the World Bank, the World Food Program, the International Labor Organization, etc.
- Making a good-faith effort to abide by the Agreed Conclusions is a way to make your country look like a sophisticated, knowledgeable member of the global community, not an uneducated, retrograde backwater.

**Here is the official UN CSW description of the Agreed Conclusions:** "The principal output of the Commission on the Status of Women is the agreed conclusions on priority themes set for each year. Agreed conclusions contain an analysis of the priority theme and a set of concrete recommendations for governments, intergovernmental bodies and other institutions, civil society actors and other relevant stakeholders, to be implemented at the international, national, regional and local level" (<http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/outcomes>).

**Every year, the CSW addresses a different priority theme** such as education, gender-based violence, the girl-child, climate, technology, poverty, etc. For instance, the theme for CSW 67 (2023) is "innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls." Many of the CSW 67 official sessions, side events, parallel events, and statements address that theme, and the Agreed Conclusions focus on it.

**The CSW works on the Agreed Conclusions through negotiations that begin with the Zero Draft** issued a few weeks before the CSW session. The Zero Draft is a fairly short document put together by UN diplomats or staffers who draw on previous UN documents that have addressed women's human rights or the priority theme. Important sources include previous CSW Agreed Conclusions and a report on the priority theme issued by the Secretary-General a couple of months before the CSW. The Secretary-General's Report draws in turn on reports from an Expert Group Meeting convened by UN Women in the fall of the previous year. If language comes from a previous document agreed to by consensus, such as previous Agreed Conclusions, it is called "agreed language" and carries special weight.

**The UN member states then have a couple of weeks to send revisions** to the entity managing the process such as the CSW Bureau, the diplomats elected by the CSW to lead the process (<https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw67-2023>), or a Facilitator appointed by the Bureau. Member states can ask to drop some language and add other language. The manager then puts all those suggestions into the second draft, the Compilation draft or the Working Text. Sometimes the text explains which countries have suggested the changes, and in other years, the text is inserted anonymously. Passages in dispute - usually most of the document - are put into square brackets.

**Then negotiators from the member states meet in person for "informal consultations"** behind closed doors known as Readings. They discuss each paragraph of the text and try to reach agreement on the final language. When they have a tentative agreement, they remove the square brackets and mark the passage "AD REF." That means the negotiators have agreed among themselves in New York but must still confer with their "capitals," i.e. their own governments back home. The point of the negotiations is to remove all the square brackets. Usually, the most contentious passages are kept for last. As agreements are reached, new versions of the Agreed Conclusions may be issued, i.e. Revision 1 or Revision 2. Then observers can see which passages are still in square brackets.

**The CSW must reach consensus on all the passages** for the session to have an Agreed Conclusions and be considered a success. Often there will be a flurry of last-minute negotiations and compromises on the final Friday of the CSW. On rare occasion, the negotiations are so difficult that consensus cannot be reached. Perhaps one state, or a group of states, will not budge on some language such as a contentious point about sexual and reproductive health or national sovereignty. Other states may feel the stakes are too high to concede the point, and negotiations fail. In most cases, however, states will compromise, even if no one is very happy about it, in order to reach consensus. No one wants to feel their time has been wasted or the session is a failure. That makes everyone look bad, especially the diplomats leading the negotiations.

**NGOs typically have difficulty finding out what is going on in the negotiations.** Sometimes an official delegation will include an NGO representative and they will let their NGO friends know what is happening. Some member states are friendlier to civil society than others. Any communication of progress happens "under the table," however. The interim documents are never posted publicly on the UN website and the final document itself is not posted until sometime after the CSW session has concluded. Sometimes at the last meeting of the CSW session, on the final Friday or Saturday if the session has run over, states make a public statement about the final Agreed Conclusions. While diplomats do not typically name names, observers can get an idea of what the contentious issues were during the negotiations.

**How can NGOs influence the Agreed Conclusions?** NGOs exert influence through member states or directly with UN staff in several ways:

- NGO representatives can communicate their views and priorities to their governments and the UN in the weeks and months leading up to CSW. They can send briefs or fact sheets to UN Women or the Secretary-General as those offices are compiling their CSW reports.
- NGOs that are accredited to ECOSOC can submit an official statement, usually due in mid-October, to bring their views to the UN member states. NGO statements will be given official UN numbers and translated into the six UN languages (<https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw67-2023/official-documents>). Member states have access to these documents on the UN website, and NGOs can bring them to the attention of relevant government officials as well.
- Even without ECOSOC accreditation, NGOs can submit statements individually to their governments and even to other member states that may have a particular interest in their priorities. They can express their views to member states or UN officials in NGO briefings held before and during CSW.
- During the negotiations, NGOs can review the Zero Draft or subsequent revisions and ask for specific changes. However, states are under no obligation to accept such recommendations.
- It helps to develop a relationship with state officials over time to exchange views and present perspectives. In some countries, there may be women's ministries or elected officials that can exert influence, and NGOs can develop a relationship with those entities.

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***US feminists collaborating to advance human rights and gender equity for women and girls worldwide***

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