

Using a thematic approach, the resolutions cover different elements of violence against women: prevention in 2010 and protection in 2011, and in 2012 the theme will be reparations for women subjected to violence. Boisclair says this approach has allowed the HRC to make progress in addressing gaps in understanding on the issue.

This approach was considered ambitious by many at the outset, as it involved a lot of new text that had not previously been negotiated. The consensus adoption of the last two resolutions, with more than 80 countries co-sponsoring them, is therefore an impressive achievement.

The negotiations in the multilateral forum are heated and “always go right down to the wire,” McCulloch says. Formal sessions, side-meetings and informal conversations are needed to find common ground, ultimately requiring creativity, patience, flexibility and long hours, he says. “There’s no way around it.” Adds Boisclair: “It’s a pretty intensive few weeks.”

The final resolutions are considered “soft law,” becoming part of international norms and standards in the area, to be further interpreted by, for example, groups on the ground, governments and courts.

The focus of the resolutions is on implementation, says James Junke, director of human rights, governance and indigenous affairs policy for DFAIT. “Initiatives like these bring necessary focus to especially troublesome dimensions of the promotion of women’s rights,” he says. “Michael and Manon have worked tirelessly and skillfully to build impressive, cross-regional and broad support for them.”

Canada has long been a champion of women’s rights in international human rights law, Junke adds, and has taken the lead on resolutions that “cumulatively built momentum and substance” toward a number of important international initiatives.

Alison LeClaire Christie, Deputy Permanent Representative at Canada’s Permanent Mission to the UN in Geneva, says that McCulloch and Boisclair are “pushing the issue forward by consolidating already agreed language and by forging broad agreement on new elements.” They are “an extraordinary team, who together have positioned Canada as the champion of what are probably the HRC’s most substantive resolutions,” she says.

Boisclair’s efforts on women’s issues go well beyond the resolutions, LeClaire Christie adds. A good example is her efforts on the annual 16-day International Campaign on Violence Against Women, from November 25 to December 10. Canada’s mission this year sponsored a panel to discuss the role of men and boys in eliminating violence against women on December 6, the anniversary of the Montreal Massacre, in collaboration with the YWCA and the Swiss White Ribbon Campaign.

Beyond the annual resolution on violence against women, Canada will continue to press the matter at the HRC, Boisclair says, adding that it has been an honour to be part of the effort, which includes additional staff all around DFAIT.

“It’s not always easy to see the impact of the work done in Geneva on the lives of women around the world, particularly when you’re sitting in negotiations arguing over where to put a comma,” she says. But hearing from organizations that they are using the resolutions in their advocacy efforts reassures Boisclair. “It makes getting up in the morning and going to work all the more worthwhile.”

McCulloch says that while it’s been slow coming, “you can look back over the decades to see the progress that’s been made on women’s issues.” Indeed, he just has to look around the graduate course on global social policy that he teaches at Carleton for evidence—which would also make his mother proud. In his class there are two men and 12 women.

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