

Report on UN Commission on the Status of Women for 2011: (CSW 55)

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Background

The Association of Presbyterian Women was granted NGO status at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in 2000 after its President, Mrs Jane Pritchard attended the Beijing Conference on Women. Since that time there has been a UN Committee as part of the national organisation of APW and the Conveners of that committee have usually taken up the opportunity to attend the annual Commission. This status gives the APW the right to be present at the annual sessions of the Commission, to advise the NZ delegation its opinion on the issues being discussed and to participate in NGO briefings at the time.

We are one of the very few national NGOs that have such status: most of the team that comes from NZ are part of an international team (for instance the Girl Guides). We also participated fully in the parallel events run by the various NGO's.

The Commission last year chose to review the most important agreement that arose out of Beijing: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). As the NZ government is a signatory to this agreement, we were interested to see how it had been implemented in our own nation and in others. (NZ's seventh report on its implementation (2006-2010) "*The Status of Women*" is available on the web site for the Ministry of Women's Affairs (www.mwa.govt.nz) One session of the Commission was taken up hearing and reviewing the international outcomes of this agreement. NZ's record in compliance with the standards is deemed excellent in that the Campaign "It's not OK" managed by the Families Commission has gained international approval, and much progress has been made legislatively and judicially for women's rights. As the Presbyterian Women we have attended conferences on this, and promoted it strongly in the church, including the wearing of white ribbons to signify a need to end all violence against women and girls.

This year I attended CSW 55, with Mary McIntyre, the previous UN Convener for the APW, and now National Coordinator for Presbyterian Women. This overlap was excellent as the systems that operate at the UN, with NGOs in attendance, are complex and a novice could waste much time and energy figuring it all out. Mary was a great mentor! We were both able to attend, thanks to funding from the Council for World Mission. We appreciated this very much, and look forward to having funding for another year. This funding was used for travel, accommodation and meal expenses, and the expenses of attending some events at the UN.

CSW 55

The Commission on the Status of Women is the primary global policy-making body of the UN devoted entirely to examining the state of progress for women in member states.

Women still comprise the majority of the world's poor and those without access to education. In addition, there are huge disparities in equal pay for equal work and unpaid work, continued high maternal mortality, prominent HIV/Aids infection, a pandemic of violence against women, high frequency of genital mutilation and appalling sex trafficking/slavery of young women. These issues determining the rights of women are **human** rights issues and the CSW is calling all member states to implement a commitment to progress.

On the other hand, it is evident that countries with greater gender equality have more competitive and faster growing economies, the presence women in leadership in peace-making increases the possibility of harmonious outcomes and greater security and infant and maternal mortality is raised. Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals is enhanced.

The theme for this year's CSW was "the access and participation of women and girls in education, training, science and technology, including the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work"

In the first week of formal sessions, each member state made its statement reporting the condition in its state, a set of draft recommendations were proposed and member state delegations and also NGOs were invited to suggest amendments.

The second week was spent debating to reach an agreed document. This is now available on: www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/55sess

A highlight of the week was the Launch of UN Women (The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women) This drew together the four areas of UN work for women into one entity, under the leadership of Ms Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile. She becomes Under Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women.

NZ Government Delegation

The NZ government delegation was led by Rowena Phair, Chief Executive, Ministry of Women's Affairs and included one of her research staff (Nicole Bernkert), Ms Pauline Winter (Chair of the National Advisory Council on the Employment of Women) and Catherine Neil, (Department of Labour.) They were assisted by the staff of the NZ Mission to the United Nations.

We were well served by our delegation: we had had a meeting in Wellington prior to leaving for the UN, and in New York, their enthusiastic consultation with us as NGOs and the exchange of feedback between government and NGO delegations was significant as we met for debriefing at the end of each day. We were also invited to the NZ Mission to the UN for breakfast one morning. (We discovered that this degree of cooperation was very rare at among other countries at the UN). We appreciated the openness, as this opportunity for advocacy was one channel for making an input on the final outcome document. On the other hand the government delegation was grateful to hear the views of those on the ground (civil society)

The presentation made by the NZ delegation was honest and reflected women's employment and education status in NZ well. The point was made that though we now have more women under 50 better educated than men, women are not as well represented in science, technology, engineering and maths, and the high number of women graduates has not resulted in women receiving equal pay or equal status in the work force. It would seem that while education is necessary for the full and equal employment of women, it is not sufficient. Attitudes need to change significantly in both the private and public sector, and among those who influence girls in their career choices (families and peer groups). In addition to this, it is clear that among Maori and immigrant women, (particularly Asian and Pacifica) educational standards are lower and employment results in significantly lower wages.

Ecumenical Women

In past years, Mary McIntyre had made significant connections with the group 'Ecumenical Women', an alliance of women of faith, coming together for the CSW. We had participated on-line before we reached NY and when we arrived appreciated the orientation day, the warm welcome from those Mary had met before, and the opportunity to work in a bigger group to formulate a programme of advocacy, from a faith perspective.

The talking points (that we would discuss with our delegations) we agreed on together.

We joined the Ecumenical Women at the beginning of each day for worship and when we could for briefing and explanation of what the day would bring. The US Presbyterian UN delegation welcomed us as well, and we found a home space in the UN Church Centre, across the road from the UN. I was privileged to write one of the devotions for the Ecumenical Women (attached) and participated in leading worship one day.

We will continue to keep in touch with this group, in order to prepare for next year's CSW, whose theme is "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development, and current challenges"

I also attended the CSW NGO orientation, where the issues for the CSW55 Sessions became clear.

Each day, NGO's from around the world (national and international groups, faith based groups, women's organisations, aid and development agencies) presented workshops, and we had a daily choice from about 20 events (in four slots). Mostly they were held in the UN Church Centre. These were an excellent opportunity to hear how

progress is being made in other countries and to network with participants. They were in addition to the Sessions of CSW and the member state presentations over at the UN, so there were many choices to be made! Frustratingly, obtaining passes to the UN Sessions was limited and had to be done daily; involving much planning. We chose to focus on workshops over a limited range of topics, specifically: Asia and Pacific regions, climate change, maternal health, mentoring young women, women's spirituality and rural women.

What I learned!!

1. NZ is highly respected as a bridge builder at the UN and forms alliances on issues, not just within blocks of member states. For instance we do not always align with neighbouring Australia but are likely to join Canada and Scandinavian states. NZ's participation in international affairs seems to be valued above our weight in terms of population and wealth etc.
2. We heard that the Pacific is not well represented in international circles: as part of the UN region "Asia and Pacific," their stronger neighbours dominate and the Pacific countries are too poor to have big delegations of either government or NGO's. Jane Pritchard (of Presbyterian Women fame) did an excellent job in advocating for better representation from the Pacific. Astonishingly NZ is not in the Pacific region, our region is "Western Europe and Others"
3. In many of workshops we attended we heard stories of the extent of violence against women:
 - a. in countries such as the Congo where the rape of women is seen as a weapon of war,
 - b. the huge occurrence of sex trafficking and slavery of young girls
 - c. the acceptance by societies of domestic violence
 - d. the violence of inferior care of the girl child, and genital mutilation
 - e. the absence of maternal health care and the incidence of HIV/aids
 - f. the violence of poverty: borne mostly by the women and children of the world.
4. We noticed the huge difference between developed and developing states in perception on the issues of woman. From my work as Global Mission Coordinator, this is really helpful: especially in any project that we might be involved in, for example in Myanmar and Vanuatu. It also highlighted in which side of the world we in NZ are and how much power and safety that gives us. How appropriate/culturally sensitive is it for us to be advising men (with whom we mostly work) on programmes for women?
5. We really appreciated the presence of a number of remarkable, articulate young women, well equipped with in-depth research on their topics, presenting their topics so well and passionate in their advocacy. They came from both developed and developing countries. I admired the way some international organisations such as the World Association of Girl Guides and Scouts and the YWCA have designed mutual mentoring programmes between younger and older women, and insisted that their boards be filled with young women.
6. We learned much about advocacy (is it the same as lobbying??) at the UN, and presenting those who have the opportunity to make a difference with well grounded information and points of view.
7. We appreciated the ecumenical/faith based perspectives and common values that under pinned the work we were doing, and the excellent worship presented. During the week the Christchurch earthquake of 22 February struck and we were held in prayer by many gathered Assemblies, in Ecumenical Women, in NGO workshops and in the UN. It was interesting to find ourselves more in the position of vulnerability than we in NZ usually are.
8. We recognised (again) that working for women's rights is not only for the sake of women but for all of society. We all benefit when women participate fully in the spheres of education, politics, science, in economics and business as well in their traditional roles. Women do hold up half the sky! But for many (most?) states, especially developing ones, the paradigm shift that allows men to share power is too big a threat.

CWS 55 Devotional

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Scripture:

Genesis 1:1-4, 27

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light and God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; Male and female he created them.

Proverbs 8:1-5, 22, 30-31.

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?

On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;

She cries out: "To you O people I call and my cry is to all that live. O simple ones, learn prudence, acquire intelligence, you who lack it.

The Lord created me at the beginning this work, the first of his acts long ago. I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his habited world and delighting in the human race.

Way back in my life, in 1966, I began an undergraduate degree in Science - majoring in Chemistry and Mathematics, in order to qualify as a teacher of high school science. One of the compulsory papers for this degree was level 1 physics. Now most NZ provincial girl's high schools did not have physics in their curriculum and I thought this might be a very difficult paper for me. It was no surprise to find myself one of only 4 women in a class of 400 students.

In the first practical laboratory sessions we were divided up into tutor groups. After a brief introduction the tutor said to our group, 'now mind you blokes look after the girls- especially in the electrical section of the course, because girls can't really understand electricity, they think differently from us men....'

Many years later, having taught physics at senior high school level and now having completed a second career as an ordained minister, (which is also designed for blokes) I marvel that we young women all accepted the judgement about our incompetence and believed it to be true! We believed we were bravely trespassing in a man's world - and anyway, surely we would be giving up any careers to set up families in the next 10 years, because that's what girls are really wired for.....

In a post-women's movement Aotearoa New Zealand, we see less of this attitude than we used to, though careers in information, engineering and agricultural technologies are under-represented by women, and there are still hidden assumptions that these are men's occupations.

But the texts on which we are focussing tell us that in many ways we have got it wrong: the God who made the heavens and the earth, made us all, men and women in her image: we have been made co-creators with God.

The second text from Proverbs 8 is parallel to the creation story founding Genesis:

Wisdom, who was with God from the beginning of all time, calls us from the streets: come learn prudence, acquire intelligence.. This figure of Wisdom (or Sophia in the Greek) is the feminine, creative side of God: she calls us all, men and women, to fulfil our potential as creatures made in the image of God.

The greatest barrier to that full participation in life, a life of creativity and capability, is the same struggle as in my 18 year old self. We buy into the unexamined assumptions that as woman we can never be as good as the men when it comes to technology, education, leadership, business: somehow our wiring is different. We simply do not believe in ourselves, let alone each other, and the assumptions and myths of our inherent inadequacies continue.

Why can we not believe in our potential to learn and to contribute fully to society, especially in science, in education, in the workplace?

I want to tell the story of a wonderful woman of my land: Susan Baragwanath. Susan was a high school teacher in a low socio-economic area in NZ called Porirua. She had great success encouraging the young women in her care to reach their potential, but became very frustrated with one group: those whose education was interrupted by unplanned childbirth. The expectation was that these girls would leave school and begin life as solo mothers, dependent on state handouts, labelled and dismissed, content to give away their potential to develop any skills except those needed to survive in this harsh new life.

But Susan believed in these young women and would not let them go: she petitioned all the authorities she could, she raised funds, she set up a day care centre and persuaded some of the young women back into the classroom (they brought their infants with them).

In 1994 she founded He Huarahi Tamariki, a second chance school: it has gone from strength to strength, with the lives of many young women turned around, having been given the opportunity, the skills and above all **the mentoring** needed to develop goals and the persistence to reach them.

It's this *belief in women* that we need to work on, the belief that God who made us in her image calls us to participate in life fully, because when we all have the opportunity to express our creativity, our skills, our loving and our wisdom, all of society, men **and** women benefit.

In New Zealand we have some amazing women leaders, such as Helen Clarke, once our Prime Minister and now heading the United Nations Development Programme, and we find women represented in all fields of endeavour at the highest level. We are proud of these women, yet maybe see them as the exception rather than the rule. They are not always appreciated by other women as creating norms or precedents for us all. Statistics tell us that there is great disparity in the earning between women and men doing the same job in the workforce. As women we accept less pay, grateful to have the job - rather than expecting to be paid what we are worth. We still have a way to go to reach equality of opportunity and access to decent work.

The first step is to believe in ourselves, and to believe in each other as precious daughters of a God who believes in us.

Prayer:

Amazing God of grace and challenge, you have given us so many gifts and such potential to change the world. Your light of creativity shines brightly in our lives.

Thank you for your confidence in us as your precious daughters.

Give us faith to believe that it is you that calls us to reach to the limits of our imaginations and creativity,

Give us courage to overcome all barriers, especially our poor image of ourselves,

Give us love to stand in solidarity with one another, encouraging each other to live life with joy and hope.

In the name of Jesus, the Wisdom of all ages, Amen.

Questions to ponder:

1. **Men and women made in God's image, in the image of the Creator.** In what ways does creativity in human beings reflect that we are in the image of God the Creator. What might this mean for women's creativity?
2. What might it mean to heed Wisdom's call from the streets to **learn prudence and acquire intelligence** knowing that God delights in us.
3. How is it in your community when women do not believe in their own gifts or in the gifts of others? How can you change this?

Point of Action:

Compile a list of wise and strong women who can mentor those beginning in their field.