

Report on attendance of St James Prior, Nola-Susan Crewe, at the 55th Session on the Status of Women at the United Nations



From 24 February to 3 March 2011 I was in New York for the above noted meeting. I was fortunate to find a flat to rent on 39th Street, only ten blocks from the U.N. which meant an easy walk to and from and a chance to enjoy a fascinating neighbourhood.

This was my first chance to attend as a member of an NGO (non-governmental organization) and it is a very different perspective than when you wander through as a tourist. In fact, it was only as the session was winding down that I felt I had a clear grip on how to participate: despite the advice and companionship of all the other Templars.



Canadian Templars at the UN

One of the great delights is also one of the frustrations: every two hours there are between six and ten new programs at two or more locations, up to ten blocks apart. The programme provides short, and sometimes misleading, descriptions that often lead you astray

in terms of the programme you think you are attending. For instance: *From Girls at Risk to Women of Strength* sounded like a tale of the progress women had made and the future that young women could now anticipate. Instead, it turned out to be a college dean explaining how much she had sacrificed to be a wife and mother (but that it was worth doing) and a psychologist explaining how damaging abortion was in the long term. On one hand it is great going with one or more Templars so that you can discuss the ideas and proposals afterwards . . . but with so many programmes, should we all be trying to cover the maximum number and comparing notes later?

The programmes I attended were:

Friday 25 February 2011

First the challenge of finding the right door to enter, the column to go through security, the desk for credentials, the kiosk for photo ID, the pass to send me off to the North Lawn Building and into Conference Room 4 for Panel Sessions.

The first Session dealt with how technology can advance women's status and security and the Serbian Ministry launched the *Global Network of Women Decision Makers* - WITNET.

This was followed by a session on Abuse of the Female Child. The delegate from Cameroon spoke to their abolishment of early marriage in her community (defined as before the age of 21), which led one to think how many Western Nations permit marriages of children of 14 or 16: particularly if they have parental consent or are pregnant.

We then dealt with Gender Statistics: in poverty-stricken communities the registration of births is often foregone (where countries have no laws requiring it) and then the child is denied employment opportunities or passports, etc. because they cannot prove their age or where/when they were born. But how to communicate the importance of registration to a peasant to whom

the \$5.00 registration fee represents a very significant portion of a month's wages?

Standing at the back of Room #3, I heard a Polish woman outlining the roadblocks to attaining equality: whether electorally or in terms of GDP which would see a 30% gain if women were adequately/equally compensated. Then there was the Netherland's concern over their low rate of female students in science, technology, engineering and medicine.

At 1500 hours I moved onto a UNICEF presentation on Child Soldiers. Ambassadors from Libya, the Congo, Somalia and Afghanistan responded. The UK, France, Portugal, USA, Russia praised the reports. The permanent representative from Chad spoke of how peace has enabled them to make a real commitment to saving children and how they had reduced the recruitment around refugee camps: but also spoke of sexual violence done with impunity against both girl combatants and victims of the war. They also talked of the issues of unexploded ordnance and land mines claiming the lives of children. And the kidnappings continue . . .

These were the formal UN sessions where reports were presented and then Member Nations presented their positions, offered anecdotes of the progress of their countries, and drowned us in statistics. On occasion delegates would come in with their entourage, state their position and depart without having heard anything reported or the comments of other nations: those positions generally being defensive.

Copies of statements were available at the back of the rooms and clearly the presented reports had been available well in advance to give the countries the necessary material to have their responses and data prepared in advance.

It was all very interesting, but nothing compared to the days ahead when I attended the NGO sessions. The formal sessions frequently had first rate reports and interesting research: but there was no debate or discussion. Formal statements were read, planned questions asked, positions reinforced. And this was definitely to

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On the other hand, the NGO sessions covered a wide variety of topics of varying professionalism and expertise and experience: people from every area of the world, all sharing their concerns, debating what is practical, teaching and learning. Sometimes things got quite heated but it was a microcosm of the passions, resources and ideologies (whether political or spiritual) that dominate the world's stage.

It also gave one insight into the complications of conflicting interests that beset our representatives in international dealings and the complexities faced each day by our UN Ambassador and staff.

Monday 28 February 2011

The film sponsored by the Templars on Female Slavery was well-attended and gave us a chance to demonstrate our concern about the 21st century enslavement of women as both sex workers and unpaid labour. The problem presented is so vast and the resources to combat it so limited: but brave men and women are going into unsafe terrain to try to save the women (and some men) who are being deceived and exploited on all continents. The film presented some very shocking scenes that impacted on the viewers and had many asking questions and going away talking about what they had learned and seen. Princess Renata asked the seminal question, "We know what is wrong, but what do we do with our sons?"

Copies of the film are available for \$22.00, including shipping, from www.notforsalefilm.com if your prior would be interested in presenting it at a local meeting.



The debate continues with Dame Anne and Lt Commander Dame Nicole



Four Canadian Tourist Templars at the UN



Chev Wayne introduces the film



Princess Renata & Dame Diane

After a quick lunch at UNICEF's cafeteria, we scattered off to different sessions.

1200 hours - Future of Mankind depends on Women, which made the point that more emphasis is needed on women's education: since statistics demonstrate that children equal or excel their mother's (not their father's level of educational).

Zenals for Women in Development pointed out that education also is determinative of political participation. Women are far more likely than men to be campaigning for,

- i. Maternal and Child Health
- ii. Youth Empowerment
- iii. Economic Empowerment of Women
- iv. Political Participation of Everyone

The Impact of Conflicts in Africa on Girls Education, focused on Sudan and Darfur and how important it is to establish security for students. Reasons for girls to not attend school ranged from familial beliefs to an inability to afford it, to the reality of sexual violence/abuse/abductions and finally areas where there is just no space or schools are unavailable.

By 1600 hours the brain was overwhelmed with facts, figures, misery and hope, but the **Coalition Against Trafficking in Persons (ENATIP)** from Nigeria was impossible to resist. They spoke of creating a world of relevance, self-worth and actualization for women and youth. Components would be literacy, the right to education, reproductive health education (a rarely mentioned subject during the sessions), AIDS/HIV education, communal peace, democracy and governance ideals. There seemed to be a committee for everything: Committee of the Support of Dignity of Women, a Girls Power Initiative, IDIA Renaissance; IRRAG Profile; Women Action Initiative International 2005 (WAI). In examining Human Trafficking several themes kept re-appearing: breaking the cycle of poverty; stopping transportation of women to become sex-workers (against their wishes); how rampant internal slavery is and how it deprives the woman of education, turns them into unpaid domestic servants who are hawked in the streets and face of the hazards associated with no choice in sex or sex partners. External transporting is common. Fathers sell their children to care for other people's children and homes - often to pay off their own gambling debts or to benefit other members of the family. Indeed, parents decide that the sacrifice of one daughter to get the family

out of poverty is a reasonable decision and so the girl is sent abroad, bound to send money home. In a country where people are eager to travel, hoping for a better life, it is easy for more sophisticated people to sell young women and their families, on the idea of a beautiful home, car and green lands. The women swear oaths which bind them more firmly than any contract would. And the trader holds a strand of their hair or some other personal item to ensure that the arrangement will be honoured.

At 1800 hours, Women of Spirit & Faith created a circle of dialogue between approximately 40 women of different faiths, cultures and experiences. Women, their leadership, their spirituality and how they had come to this place in their faith journey: a place where the religion of their childhood was inadequate to feed their souls - but their faith was stronger than ever. Sarah Peak's, *The Red Book*, set out the problem many attendees faced in this fascinating session:

**The Human Mind CANNOT Contain
Curiosity & Judgment
Simultaneously**

Tuesday 1 March 2011

1000 hours - Back to the East Lawn Building and reports on the financial realities of women. They receive less pay for the same job; have little control over family or national assets and many lack control over their own reproduction. According to Fortune 500, 3% of their corporations are led by women; 6% have women in management positions, and 15% of board members are women. Research points to women as being "greener": they recycle, purchase recycled products and make energy efficient equipment purchases. They also have started recycling businesses with notable success.

Energy poverty (1.6 billion people lack electricity) and possible solutions were presented. Solar electric lighting systems working on a small scale to service one village, one family, etc., can also provide for community lighting, water pumping/purifying, schools

(25% increase in the pass rate when electricity becomes available), clinics/health care; the fostering of small businesses; wireless/internet access; agriculture; adult learners; enterprise all can benefit.

Many countries presented reports on what they were doing and the **Network Women & Development in Europe** spoke on the centrality of gender equality for the success of these developments.

1500 hours - Maternal Mortality & Prevention. This session addressed the 350,000 deaths (mainly in the developing world) last year and how there is only a very slow decline in the numbers. Severe bleeding, sepsis, hypertension, unsafe abortions, lacking antenatal care and adequate health systems are the primary causes. Solutions are to be founding working with the various governments, quality family planning; obstetric and medical care; MDG5 implementation everywhere.

Communications, transportation systems and community awareness are also among the challenges that lie between women and healthy pregnancies. Husbands need to learn the advantages of schooling girls and spacing pregnancies. Girls must be valued and not seen as burdens that benefit only their husband's family. Schooling results in girls less likely to get pregnant at an early age, more likely to be aware of the dangers of unprotected sex and more likely to insist on condoms. They are also then more able to become teachers which will enable other girls to attend school where tradition mitigates against male teachers and female students. However, in areas of conflict, girls in school are a primary target: as are their schools and teachers.

Canada is Co-Chair of the Accountability Committee which is creating a framework for rich and poor countries to work together. See <http://www.everywomaneverychild.org>

This is the session at which five NGOs were supposed to read statements: including the Templars.

Dame Diane O'Brien Pisitelli was to read a statement representing nine NGOs [IAW - International Alliance of Women; IIROSA - International Islamic Relief Organization - Saudi Arabia); ICJW - International Council of Jewish Women; OSMTH; INPEA - International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse; WFMH - World Federation for Mental Health; David M. Kennedy Center; ICW - International Council of Women; 3HO Foundation (Happy, Healthy, Holy Organization, Inc.). Unfortunately, government representatives spoke at such length, only one of the five had the opportunity to make their report: to the great disappointment of all of us.



Dame Diane O'Brien Pisitelli

Wednesday 2 March 2011

1000 hours - **From Girls at Risk to Women of Strength** - was the most disappointing of sessions. It began with a discussion of how much is given up for marriage (while encouraging it) and ending with an anti-choice lecture from a psychiatrist who contends abortion results in mental illness.

1100 hours - **Race, Gender & Climate Change**. This ranged from concerns over the tar sands to the colour of the New York City water. The depravities of privatization seemed to be the greatest concern.

1400 - When the advertised programme, *Women, War and Broken Lives: Rebuilding Better Resources and Justice for Women and Girls*, which was to be put on by a Jordanian group did not materialize, three members of the *Women's Centre Legal Aid in Palestine* offered to fill in. It appeared to be a set-up with three

passionate New York Jews (two of whom were Holocaust survivors) objecting to almost everything they said. Both parties were clearly known to the other from previous attendances.

However, when they weren't arguing with each other, there were fascinating aspects of how law is practiced in Palestine: with a real bouquet of legal systems, British, Ottoman, military, Jordanian, Egyptian, Shariah and Palestine's own infusion.

Some aspects of how the Wall impacts on day-to-day living were clearly news to some attendees: for instance, traditional families refusing to allow their daughters to go to school if it means crossing any checkpoint because of potential searches. Colonization vs. occupation was a major debate as was whether the Palestinians could ever accept two nations if it meant living peacefully with the Jews. And, as elsewhere, no resolution was reached. However the rest of us left with a greater appreciation for the task of peacemaking.

1600 hours - Lawyers Without Borders presented, *Thinking Outside the Box: Cutting Edge Techniques to Empower Women and Girls*. These lawyers have developed fascinating teaching methods for legal matters that use such media as games and comic books to communicate serious issues. For instance, a game somewhat reminiscent of Snakes and Ladders shows how decisions you make can have unanticipated results (you don't write a will, your children and wife get nothing and are dependent on the goodwill of your brother who inherits all; you don't get a birth certificate for your child and they can't get a government job 20 years later). Clickers, similar to those used on game shows, allow people to vote anonymously on a choice of answers to legal questions. As the questions go on, results are posted and they learn the answers they would not otherwise ask about in a public space. Comic books that are culturally sensitive can explain how voting works to people never before enfranchised. Lawyers Without Borders is a growing group in the USA (but currently involved in litigation themselves with the group from Quebec which had earlier claimed the name, but primarily serve in French-speaking countries).

. . .

By far the high point of the Sessions was the informal opportunity to meet with both Templars and others from such a variety of walks of life and life experiences. And it was fascinating to discover how much we shared. We shared wonderful times in the spirit of our Order: whether eating or walking or debating, it was a grand blessing.

And on a lighter note: the national costumes made for a rainbow of flashing colours . . . and the styles and shapes and colours of headwear fascinated me and made up the majority of photos I came home with!



Interestingly, an issue that had been discussed in Toronto struck an immediate cord with the women in New York: how, despite the commitment of OSMTH to the Status of Women Sessions, two recent (if relatively minor) decisions suggest that the enthusiasm for equality of women may be more lip service than internalized determination. The first was the choice of “Fellow” to replace “Order of Merit” for non-Christians who seek association with our Order. “Fellow”, other than as an academic, has a very male connotation. Merriam-Webster offered the following as to how “fellow” is employed:

Examples of *FELLOW*

1. *fellows* and girls at a party
2. a young *fellow* like you
3. Your son's a bright little *fellow*.
4. She's found herself a new *fellow*.
5. a *fellow* of the American College of Surgeons
6. a *Fellow* of the Royal Society

Academic excellence is not the criteria for membership for non-Christians. A term such as "Companion", or "Champion", or "Defender of the Order", or some comparable terminology would be more appropriate. Someone remarked that any comparable female terminology for all members, such as "Matron of the Order" would surely drive away any man expected to bear it.

Similarly, the recent decision to use Chevaleresse -- the head of a fiefdom that had been headed by a male and conceded to a female, or the wife of a knight could be called a chevaleresse -- for female members of the Order, rather than Dame, made all question the choice. It was not a term awarded to women for their service. Rather it was a term attained through one's relationship to a man. Within the Templar Order, we are all knighted. We then use the term Sir or Chevalier if male and Dame if female. We would ask those with the power to make such decisions, to consider how these two recent decisions have placed our Order in the unenviable position, when appearing in such a forum as the United Nations or being examined by those who judge a body by its sensitivity to equality, as lacking.



Time to enjoy the company of other Templars

It seemed that everyone had a vision statement and inspiring slogans and mottos were in great abundance, but the one that really touched me and seemed to epitomize the 55th Session, was,

"Trust your own outrage"¹

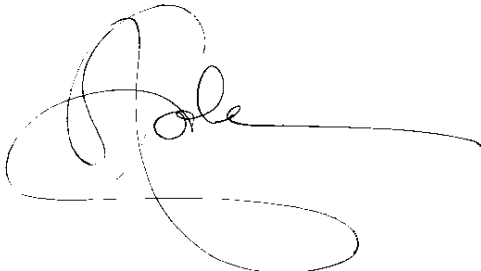
¹ From the Women of Spirit & Faith Session

Whether one's outrage demanded human rights for everyone, peace, education, equality or protection from abuse and slavery, each individual's quest united all attendees in reaching out for a better world for all.

And we are also looking forward to next year at the U.N. Everyone was excited about the idea of doing another presentation: there are so many issues in which Templars are involved and we see this arena as one in which we can demonstrate our commitment to leaving this world as a finer place for the generations to follow because of our Order's commitment to Christ's injunction to love our God and our neighbour as ourselves.

Thank-you for the opportunity to share in the 55th Session of the Status of Women: to learn and grow and meet such fascinating people.

God bless
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Nola-Susan Crewe, GOTJ
Prior - St James