

## 2015 UNCSW59 Diocesan Convention Address

Friday, October 2, 2015 – Lelanda Lee

I bid you warm greetings of Aloha and Peace.

Both Helen Abyei and I are delighted to give you a glimpse of our time at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women's 59th annual conference. We were appointed as part of a 20-person delegation by Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori to represent the Episcopal Church, which has official status as a member of the UN's Economic and Social Council.

Over two weeks in March, the Commission on the Status of Women held official hearings at the UN. Non-Governmental Organizations, or NGOs, held over 450 parallel events at numerous sites. The UN's official chaplain led daily morning worship at the UN Church Center. Delegates like Helen arranged official visitations with UN ambassadors to present the church's official statement and advocate for specific issues.

Within the first two days of pre-opening events, two overarching issues emerged that would engage the 10-12,000 women and men in attendance. They were first, gender equality and empowerment for women, and second, human trafficking.

The other issue that emerged within the very first day of orientation was the wide gap between the aspiration of various nations to accord women and girls gender equality with men and boys as evidenced by legislation

enacted by the nations, compared to the actuality of how those laws are implemented and enforced. The Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, minced no words when she said, “Implementation has been weak” and that there has been a collective failure among the member states. She pointed out that even in Iceland, considered the most advanced nation democratically and in terms of gender equity, and which has significant laws addressing violence against women, statistics still show that one in three Icelandic women gets beaten by a man. In the USA, the Equal Rights Amendment for women’s rights was written in 1923, and nearly a century later, still remains three states short of ratification.

Director Phumzile called out the tokenism that exists in the quest for gender equality, citing the need to overcome stereotypes. Women don’t get hired or are passed over for promotions when there is a stereotype that women will be unreliable workers, because they put their children and families before their work responsibilities. Women are not paid the same wages as men, because there is a stereotype that women aren’t the breadwinners in their families. Yet, the Pew Research Center tells us in a 2013 study that four in ten U.S. households with children under age 18 now include a mother who is either the sole or primary earner for her family.

Forty percent of U.S. households is a statistically significant number. This is an example of the feminization of poverty. Consider also that women engage in the vast majority of the unpaid caretaking of children, elders, and the infirm and homebound throughout the world. Unpaid work is exactly that: *unpaid*. No paycheck, no pension, no credit for having contributed to the

welfare of their families, their communities, and their nations. Part of the solution to gender equity must be some form of compensatory equivalency for this unpaid labor of women.

In many countries, birth registration for all is a devastating issue. In both the Syrian refugee crisis and the refugee crisis of unaccompanied children at the U.S. southern border, we can see the effect of lacking documentation to prove a person's existence has legitimacy. In our western hemisphere, there is a crisis in both the Dominican Republic and Bermuda where laws have been passed to take away the citizenship of persons with Haitian ancestry retroactively – back to 1939 in the Dominican Republic.

In April, I had the opportunity to keynote an interfaith gathering of over a hundred people from numerous faith traditions in Mid-Michigan to urge them to be proactive in holding conversations within and across their faith communities to address issues like stereotypes, inheritance laws, birth registration, and unpaid caretaking, and how these issues foster gender inequities. Each of us can learn to deconstruct and parse issues of equity, and we can raise our consciousness and that of our faith communities. We can enter the public conversations on gender equity, support equity legislation, and hold our elected officials accountable for implementation of equity laws.

At UNCSW59 we also heard repeatedly how wrong it is to use religion as an excuse for subjugation and violence against women and girls and how that practice must be stopped by all religions.

The transformation to a gender equal world begins with providing the same amount of nutrition – food – and the same access to education to girl children. It continues with providing health services that are targeted at women's and girls' health, such as elimination of female genital mutilation and access to reproductive health services, because the fact is that women cannot NOT have babies if humanity is to survive. This is not just a third world country issue. Countries of privilege such as the U.S.A. are facing backlashes that are attempting to drag us back into the 19th century and earlier.

Movement towards a gender equal world continues with elimination of so-called honor killings, because how can we call murder of women and girls honorable? It continues with elimination of child marriage where the so-called child brides are as young as 7-years old. Child marriage actually fits the definition of human trafficking – that it is coerced, that the girl has no freedom to escape, and that money has changed hands in the form of a bride price.

Front-loading intervention to the girl child is a fundamental philosophy behind the UN's Millennium Development Goals, which have just been brought up to date in September when the 18 Sustainable Development Goals were introduced. There are multiple root causes that keep gender inequality at a distorted 80-20 ratio instead of moving towards 50-50 equality. For example, climate change and related disasters that cause financial ruin impact women disproportionately. Women are often the first defenders when it comes to global disasters – the ones who do the nursing and the caretaking.

Next, the scourge of human trafficking: The actual statistics of human trafficking can only be estimated, because human trafficking operates in an underground, gray world that is not subject to easy monitoring or easy data gathering. The International Labor Organization, whose statistics are used by the UN and the Polaris Project, a well respected organization combating human trafficking, estimates there are 209 million victims of human trafficking globally, including 5.5 million children. Women and girls make up 55% of that number. The International Labor Organization also estimates that forced labor and human trafficking is a \$150 billion industry worldwide. Human trafficking is comprised of 70% sex trafficking and 30% labor trafficking, plus organ trafficking. As a criminal activity, human trafficking is second only to drug trafficking worldwide.

In December 2014 an unprecedented meeting took place at the Vatican where religious leaders from major Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox Christian denominations, and Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim religions, met to sign a shared Declaration against modern slavery.

I'm going to read the short statement that they signed in its entirety to you. It calls all of us into spiritual and practical partnership with its religious leader signatories. In fact, you can go to the Website of the Global Freedom Network to sign onto the statement yourself.

The statement says, *"We, the undersigned, are gathered here today for a historic initiative to inspire spiritual and practical action by all global faiths and people of good will everywhere to eradicate modern slavery across the world by*

*2020 and for all time. In the eyes of God, each human being is a free person, whether girl, boy, woman or man, and is destined to exist for the good of all in equality and fraternity. Modern slavery, in terms of human trafficking, forced labour and prostitution, organ trafficking, and any relationship that fails to respect the fundamental conviction that all people are equal and have the same freedom and dignity, is a crime against humanity. We pledge ourselves here today to do all in our power, within our faith communities and beyond, to work together for the freedom of all those who are enslaved and trafficked so that their future may be restored. Today we have the opportunity, awareness, wisdom, innovation and technology to achieve this human and moral imperative.”*

Amen.