

## Quaker United Nations Office Geneva, Summer School 2018 Report by Meghan Stewart-Ward

It is currently Tuesday 24 July, and I have had a few days to reflect on and digest some of what I experienced at the QUNO Summer School of 2018. It was two weeks of learning, discussion, new friendships, and being shown some of the work it takes to make our world a better place.

There were 26 of us participating; with our house mum, Rhiannon, and our two leaders (the two Programme Assistants at QUNO) Stephen and Isobel, we were 29. We had beautiful weather – it remained between 28 and 31 degrees each day, and we only had a smattering of rain on a couple of days. Perfect weather for swimming and exploring Geneva.

We were from countries as diverse as Nepal, the UK, Burundi, Australia, Canada, Latvia, the USA, and the DRC (Congo). I was the only participant from Aotearoa New Zealand. The diversity ensured that our perspectives and our discussion topics remained broad.

We stayed at Geneva's only youth hostel, but our base each weekday was Quaker House, the headquarters of QUNO Geneva. Our days began around 8am and we would set off on the tram to Quaker House, a 25-minute journey away. What a place to spend our days! A lovely old Swiss house, four-floors, with large windows opening onto the basement where we had most of our meetings and where Geneva Quaker Meeting gathers each Sunday. Its garden was beautiful and a great place for us to relax in-between sessions.

It was a full-on and intense two-weeks. We started on the evening of the July 8, with introductions and some games to ease any nerves, however, we all took to each other quickly and spent the evening chatting by the lake. Lake Geneva is only a five-minute walk from the hostel and was a natural focal point for our evenings. I went swimming about six or seven times; it was the perfect way to refresh and reset after a day of heavy discussions.

A highlight of the experience for me, was sitting-in on the 70th session of The UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in which New Zealand was outlining their most recent progress in meeting their obligations under the CEDAW convention. The fact that we sat-in on New Zealand's session was just by chance, and I felt very lucky to see my country present to the committee. A simple way of describing the committee sessions is: every country who is party to the convention presents to CEDAW every two years on how they are eliminating discrimination against women in their country, and then the committee made up of experts in women's rights gives them a cross-examination over many hours.

New Zealand was questioned and criticised; praised on things we are doing well, shamed, and urged to do better overall. New Zealand's delegation was represented by Jan Logie, MP, and I felt she did a great job of being honest, open, and receptive to both criticisms and praise – a sentiment that was echoed by Prof. Ruth Kaddari who sits on CEDAW and who our Summer School group had a meeting with after the day's proceedings. She said that New Zealand provided a good dialogue while some countries can verge on being hostile when presenting their reports and facing questions.

Leaving this session was the most positive I had felt about the UN in a couple of years. It was a real reminder of where change first must come – within the country itself, at the local level. The UN is only as powerful as the power states give it; it cannot intervene in our countries without consent, we are

responsible for creating the societies we want to live in but CEDAW is a great example of showing where the UN does have power, influence and the ability to create change. Naming and shaming is a powerful tool, it may be all the UN has but it does work. CEDAW committee members make suggestions to our governments and they can choose to act on or note these recommendations. I am very glad to have witnessed this year's session, and to see how change can take place at the highest level of international politics.

**Some of the other organisations we had meetings with included:**

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)

Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL)

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

Programme Coordinator for Indigenous Rights for Canadian Friends Service Committee

World Trade Organisation

Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

swisspeace

UN Environment

UK Mission, Migration

Doctors Without Borders (MSF)

CARE International

UNHCR

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons

To describe Summer School as life-changing would be accurate, I have made friends out of it that I know will be lifelong friendships. I look forward to staying in touch with the group and seeing where they go and what great work they all get up to. They are some of the kindest, smartest and most politically aware young people I have ever met.

About half the group were Quakers and the other half had a Quaker connection, i.e. a grandparent, went to a Friends' school, or were attracted to Quaker values. I found it such an enriching and affirming experience to be surrounded by so many like-minded young people, and I know that we all left feeling revived and ready to go back into the world to work for and study the causes we're passionate about.

I want to thank Stephen, Isobel, Rhiannon and all the QUNO staff for the hard work and hours they spent in preparation for Summer School and for the care and love they showed to all the participants. It was immensely appreciated.

**Meghan Stewart-Ward**

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