

Excerpt from the presentation given at the WATAC Conference in July 2007

Women, Power and Peace

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I have prepared these remarks on women, religion and war with the ideas of three others in mind: the first is Jonathan Swift's: "We have just enough religion to make us hate," Swift wrote, "but clearly not enough to make us love one another."

The second is Benizar Bhutto's insight that, "Every dictator uses religion as a prop to keep himself in power."

And the third is Eamon Devalera's comment that, "Women are at once the boldest and the most unmanageable revolutionaries."

There is another old story that bears remembering now, I think. This story tells us of a disciple who said to the Holy One, "Holy One, answer the greatest spiritual question of them all: Is there life after death?" And the Holy One said, "Oh, dear friend, the greatest spiritual question of them all is not, Is there life after death?

The greatest spiritual question of them all is, Is there life before death?"

That question has new meaning, surely, for women and religions whose world is on the brink of war, always flirting with war, forever faced with the changing nature of war, with its new barbaric talent for high-tech extermination and its new disregard for the so-called distinctions between combatants and non-combatants.

At the turn of the 20th century, according to UNIFEM, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, civilian casualties accounted for 5% of the war dead. In World War I, the total number of civilians killed had climbed to 15% of total wartime casualties. In World War II civilians were 65% of the victims of war. By the early 1990s, civilians were over 75% of the war dead. And now, today, here in our world, over 90% of those killed in war are civilians.

And who knows it better than we do. In Iraq, for every dead soldier, 14 other deaths, 93% of the total casualties, US and Iraqi, are civilian. And why are we surprised?

Indeed, women have a place to fill and a stake to claim and a role to play in the world's pursuit of peace. It is women who are trafficked to satisfy the warrior—from 250,000 to 500,000 women were raped in Rwanda alone in 1994.

It is women who are forced into sexual slavery and exploitation for the sake of the warriors. The International Organization for Migration estimates that over 2 million women are trapped in war zones and sold across borders annually. In 1995 in Cambodia, 31% of the so-called "sex-workers" were girls between the ages of 12-17.

But those issues never get negotiated. Those issues never come to the compensation tables, those issues – the issues of women and the children they're left to support in the midst of war, as a result of war, are never redressed by peace treaties, never considered by male mediators, never factored into the costs of war, never considered in the determination to go to war, never counted as victims.

Clearly it is time for women – the other half of the human race – the other face of God — to save both their religions and their nations. Women, the life-bearers, must now give to the world the spiritual life the world lacks.

It is time for women to take their place in bringing spiritual light, to show the way to a world adoring at the shrine of the god of death, at their expense, at the cost of their children, at the destruction of their globe.

To speak of peace we cannot be shrunken in spirit by the miseries of our ancestors; we must be enlarged in spirit because we have learned too much from their suffering to repeat the entanglements that destroyed them.

The Talmud teaches that the miracle of the Red Sea was not that the waters parted. The miracle of the Red Sea, the Talmud says, is that when the waters parted, the first Jew walked through. One Jew, one solitary Jew, had the faith to be led beyond the political pressures of the moment to begin the new beginning.

When we see a path through the water bed beginning to clear before us, we must run one at a time to link arms with those in the land on the other side who are also braving the waves in the hope that together we can meet half way and all of us come safely through.

It is the one who goes through the waters first who gives the rest of us courage. It is the one who braves the water bed first who gives the rest of us hope. It is the one who believes in miracles who becomes a miracle to the rest of us.

And, like that lone Israelite standing in faith on the bank of the Red Sea, if we believe that we were created to do good in this world to be co-creators of the kingdom here, we cannot allow fear or hate, vengeance or victimage to make that first step impossible.

We must refuse to ignore the question, What do women have to do with war? And we must cry out the answer to the ends of the globe: Women have everything to do with war.

Everything. Everything. Everything.

It isn't true now that some women do not go to war. They die, too, from bombs and bullets. They die in large cities and small villages for lack of food. Then they die, left behind, from lack of water or they die for years from drinking water destroyed by war and left filthy with human faeces.

Indeed women must have a role, not only in the reconstruction of societies already ravaged by war but, more than that, they must take a voice until they are given a voice in the development of peaceful alternatives to war, as well.

The lives of our children, the protection of millions the hopes of all humankind wait again, now for women from opposite cultures, opposite traditions, to step over the lines of political hatred to save them.

In October 2000 the first UN Security Council resolution on women and peace and security – resolution 1325 – passed unanimously. It is a watershed resolution. It makes women and gender perspective an essential of all peace agreements, all refugee camp plans, all peacekeeping operations and all reconstruction plans in war-torn societies.

It calls for:

1. An international truth and reconciliation commission on violence against women in armed conflict as a step toward ending the impunity of it.
2. They want sanctions against the trafficking of women and girls in order to criminalize it everywhere.
3. They want protection officers deployed at the highest levels – by the commissioners of refugees, human rights, humanitarian affairs, the UN children's fund and the Red Cross – to shield, secure and sustain displaced populations, all of them largely women.
4. They want HIV/AIDS programs in conflict situations to address the disease burden now being carried by women whose very bodies have been made a weapon of war.

5. They want gender-training programs to guide government officials In dealing with women victims.
6. They want gender-based conflict resolution processes that seek peace through understanding rather than force.
7. They want gender equality in all peace processes, agreements, and transitional governance structures. So that the agendas of both men and women, women and men will be integrated into peace-building programs.
8. Finally, they want resolution 1325 implemented in every country In the world: The very nature of warfare has changed and so therefore must the nature of peace-building change.

It is time for women to take responsibility for making real the religions they believe in. It is time for women to be an organized, international voice for peace, a religious critic of national policies that threaten the life of the world, a sign of peace on the local level everywhere.

It is time for women to reach across the borders that men will not breach to take the hands of the other not to bind them but to bond them. It is time for women's analyses of world situations and women's solutions to conflict to be heard.

The philosopher Camus wrote: "The saints of our time are those who refuse to be either its executioners or its victims." It is time for religious women to refuse to be either victims or executioners – not only to make safe the world but to make real the religions we revere so that life before death can come, as God wants, for us all.

The question for us all then is, Why isn't it happening and what does that have to do with you and me?

The answer is crucial now – when we need to develop the kind of religion that makes us love one another. When we need to foil the dictators who use religion as a prop to keep themselves in power; When we clearly need to release women – "the boldest and most unmanageable of revolutionaries."