

Faith-Based Peacebuilding: The Need for a Gender Perspective –

Religion: a threat for women's rights or a driving force for social change and women's peace activism?

Every year the Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) celebrates the *International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament - May 24* – with an international publication (May 24 Pack) and a public event in the Netherlands.

On May 26, 2011, approximately 70 people gathered in The Hague to celebrate this day and discuss faith-based and interfaith peace building, women's roles in this, strategies to deal with the obstacles women face in their peace work and the relevance of including a gender perspective in debates about religion and peacebuilding. The seminar brought together a respected group of gender and peace activists, academics, NGO representatives and media.

Opening – Isabelle Geuskens – International Fellowship of Reconciliation Women Peacemakers Program (IFOR/WPP)

After the opening by the moderator of the day, Lenneke Hoedemaker, the speakers and participants were officially welcomed by Isabelle Geuskens, IFOR/WPP Program Manager.

From 13-15 September 2010, IFOR/WPP brought together 35 women activists from 21 different countries representing various religions and faiths for the pilot Consultation entitled "Interfaith Peacebuilding Consultation: The Need for a Gender Perspective". Isabelle elaborated on the rationale and development of this project.

While its role in peacebuilding and conflict is still a relatively new field of academic study and research, the media and public opinion are giving considerable attention to the negative role that religion plays in conflict (e.g. the increased tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the West or the communal violence in India). The rise of religious fundamentalisms (e.g. the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Christian Right in the USA) and the threat they pose for the human rights of women are also receiving much attention. Less attention is given to the many historical examples of how religion can play a positive role in promoting peace and human rights (e.g. the Civil Rights Movement in the USA or the role of the Catholic Church in the People's Power movement against Marcos in the Philippines) and to the successes of interfaith cooperation (e.g. the joint peace efforts undertaken by Imams and Christian ministers in Nigeria, the cooperation between Hindu and Christian communities in the 2002 strikes in Madagascar or the joint reconstruction efforts by Muslims, Jews, Orthodox and Roman Catholics in Bosnia). It is the experience of IFOR/WPP that many women activists become involved in peacebuilding because of values such as tolerance and respect for diversity. Many find support for such values, and are often sustained in their dangerous work for peace, in their respective religious beliefs and spirituality.

Nonetheless, religion can also act as a serious obstacle to women peacebuilders. Women peace activists struggle with the fact that they are often criticized for becoming involved in public debates by male religious leaders, whose interpretations of religious texts support the exclusion of women from public life. The patriarchal nature of religion also hinders the active involvement of women in faith-based and interfaith peace initiatives on a leadership level, as those levels are generally dominated by male religious leaders. This is not only a great obstacle for women peacemakers; it is also undermines sustainable and effective peacebuilding in the longer term and hence affects society as a whole.

Isabelle welcomed the speakers and audience and invited the different speakers to share their expertise on the topic.

Hans Ulrich Gerber – International Fellowship of Reconciliation IFOR)

Hans Ulrich Gerber, IFOR's President, spoke about faithbased peacebuilding, religion and nonviolence. He addressed the general popular assumption, widespread also in the peace movement, that conflict is a problem and should be prevented or done away with quickly. Yet, it is violence, not conflict, which often takes the form of injustice. If the reality and potential of, and indeed the need for conflict as a given and not evil in itself would be accepted, this would be very beneficial. He emphasized the importance of conflict to incite change and transformation.

In order to consider the role of religion in conflict transformation, one really needs to consider the place of peace in religion. On that account, in spite of the countless appeals to peace by religious leaders all over the world, religious institutions and churches have demonstrated little actual commitment to nonviolent approaches and to resistance of the military machine that holds the world's economy and budget priorities hostage at the detriment of education, health and the environment. Faith-based approaches carry a high potential for constructive conflict transformation because faith is a spiritual commitment to love and respect in a self-giving spirit.

Hans noted that there cannot be peace building without conflict transformation and this depends ultimately on the principle of letting go, forgiveness and of hope. Conflict transformation theory emphasizes the importance of using different lenses to understand conflict and its situation. One such lens could be religion and its cultural expressions, institutions, and common practices on both the collective and personal level.

Cassandra Balchin – Association for Women's Rights in Development

Cassandra Balchin is currently the Lead Researcher for Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms initiative from the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). The initiative's analysis unmask and demystifies religious fundamentalisms, and shares strategies of how women's rights activists can resist and challenge them. The research draws on the results of a global survey of over 1,600 women's rights activists, in-depth interviews with over 50 key experts, as well as supplementary research and consultations. More than one in ten of the survey respondents identified themselves as working on in the areas of militarization, conflict or peacebuilding.

Cassandra started off with explaining that there is not one definition of religious fundamentalisms, which applies to all the complex and diverse local manifestations of this phenomenon. However, despite local diversities, there are certain characteristics that women's rights activists associate fundamentalisms with. Across regions and religions, women's-rights activists most commonly characterize religious fundamentalisms as being "absolutist and intolerant".

The second most commonly mentioned characteristic was that fundamentalisms are "anti-women and patriarchal". Across the world, women's-rights activists find that a major strategy fundamentalists use to increase their social and political power is to blame social problems on a "decline in the family" and to insist instead on promoting rigid gender roles. Hence they should be of interest in the work of all those who seek to advance women's rights.

However, fundamentalisms can both be a cause of war and conflict and a result of conflict, sometimes in a seemingly never-ending cycle. For example, national conflict in the Congo, Kenya, Lebanon and the Former Yugoslavia has both promoted and been promoted by religious fundamentalisms.

More than three-quarters of women's-rights activists surveyed by AWID felt that the strength of religious fundamentalisms has increased globally in the past ten years. This has serious implications for the human rights of women, since fundamentalist agendas reduce rights in the areas of health and reproductive rights, sexual rights and freedoms, the participation of women in the public sphere, family laws, and economic rights, in addition to a general reduction in the autonomy of women and increased violence against women. But it is not just women who feel the impact; there is a shared impact on all human rights. Broad areas of rights with regard to such as areas as education, health, employment, and cultural rights are threatened by fundamentalist agendas. This broad impact of fundamentalisms on all areas of human rights and development, including peace work, mean that a wide range of social movements have a stake in challenging fundamentalist power and influence

Nursyahbani Katjasungkana (Cordaid)

Nursyahbani Katjasungkana spoke on the research conducted by Cordaid and KIAS (this is a community of change of Indonesian women networks/organizations) on the role of women religious leaders in Indonesia in addressing fundamentalism. For this research they interviewed six powerful (local) Muslim women leaders with a pesantren (a traditional Islamic boarding school) background, as well as six feminist activists using religion and faith as their inspirational source of social change. For them, (re-)interpreting Islam can serve as a means to promote gender equality, to counter gender violence, challenge patriarchal stereotypes and fundamentalist approaches to religious texts.

Nursyahbani praised the women leaders who clearly explained to her that "men have been allowed to proclaim their stereotypical interpretations of the faith for too long" and "patriarchy is a creation of men, not of God", and act as powerful female role models in this.

She quoted Aini Masruri, member of local parliament and head of a girls pesantren in Lombok: *"One day, when I was seventeen, my parents told me that in a week I would be marrying someone I didn't even know, a thirty-five-year-old man, a religious scholar. Fifteen men from my new husband's family came to collect me. They call this the adat marari, the traditional collection of the bride, but I call it what it is: kidnapping."*

"Never, in all those hard years, did I ever doubt my faith. Just the opposite. In my most difficult times, I took comfort in the Qur'an. It is not Islam that is to blame for the injustice I suffered, it is my husband. And even though my husband is a scholar of Islam, I don't think his behaviour towards me comes from his faith, but from his need to be the boss. That's not the same thing."

The publication of the research is expected to appear in the autumn of 2011 (Dutch, English, Bahasa Indonesia).

Farida van Bommel – Multicultural Women Peacemakers Network

Farida van Bommel was born in 1952 in the Netherlands, as a child of Muslim Migrants from the Moluccan Islands. From 1980 till 1995 she was coordinator and coach of the monthly women's meetings of the Muslim Information Centre, which brings together women from different backgrounds.

When tensions rose between Muslims and Christians on the Moluccan Islands in 2000, she founded the organization "Women for Peace on the Moluccans Islands" (Stichting Vrouwen voor Vrede op de Molukken - VvVM) in The Netherlands, which aims to encourage interreligious dialogue and women's empowerment between Muslims and Christians in the Moluccan diaspora communities in The Netherlands and Muslims and Christians on the Moluccan Islands. The VvVm is an association of Moluccan Muslim, Catholic and Protestant women. With the understanding that a peaceful society is based on trust and cooperation, the VvVM seeks to

overcome religious and therefore cultural differences by bridging the gap between their perceived differences through peaceful dialogue.

Tensions that had arisen between Muslims and Christians were heading towards religious conflicts. To prevent this, the VvVM became convinced that it was important to work from a religious perspective. While both religious groups have the same culture and traditions they were actually complete strangers to each other. In bridging the gap between these two religious groups VvVM believed it was important to listen – by listening people can learn about others' pain and recognize that, in reality, it is shared by both sides. VvVM brought together people of different religions in, for example, a mosque, in cooperation with the imam. Farida emphasized that faith-based peacebuilding works, when people acknowledge and accept each other's identity and from there people can work towards a common goal. While religion is often used to cause harm, it can also be used in a positive and constructive way and prove to be a source of inspiration for peace.

July 2006, on invitation of the Netherlands Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Farida participated in the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), entitled "Interfaith understanding and cooperation for a peaceful world". VvVM's recommendation "Empowering women to assume a more active role in utilising the potential of interfaith dialogue to contribute to conflict-prevention, conflict-resolution and peace-building" was accepted in the Larnaca Action Plan 2006, which was an outcome of the meeting. VvVM is one of influential organizations that focus on policy as well as practice for women and, uniquely, only by women. Farida van Bommel was declared a Heroine of Democracy in 2009.

Discussion

After the presentation of the speakers, a lively debate between audience and speakers reflected the relevance of the topic of the day. An important discussion topic was the intertwining of cultural and religious practices, which often leads to primacy being given to the boy child in many cultures, which in turn leads to men having more opportunities in life (i.e. power is in the hands of men). The discussion evolved into the challenges women face in terms of entering spaces of worship and speaking about and mobilizing others for women's rights (e.g. inter-religious round tables for peace often marginalize women). It was noted how patriarchal values dominate in (inter)faith-based peacebuilding initiatives and organizations. Religious leaders are mostly male, including in faith-based peace organizations. Related to this, speakers and audience agreed that religion itself does not discriminate against women, but the interpretation of the religious texts does.

It was recognized that education and awareness-raising efforts about women's rights (particularly aimed at the younger generations) remain crucial as a way of challenging this. Those efforts should empower women to become leaders and should make the case that religious texts can also be interpreted as championing women's rights. In this regard, it's also important to educate other groups, e.g. donors, peacebuilding institutions, governments, etc. about interfaith and faith-based peacebuilding and how this impacts women's lives (e.g. how it can both advance and undermine women's rights).

A participant from the audience noted that it's crucial for both faith-based and secular women activists to engage with one another in their work for gender justice and gender-sensitive peacebuilding. Work needs to be done in terms of claiming the right to redefine religion, bringing out its positive and empowering aspects in women's lives while strategizing against harmful and discriminatory practices that are justified on the basis of religion.

Workshops:

After the break, participants broke up into two workshops.

Peacebuilding: Religion and Spirituality as a Source of Inspiration (organized by the Platform Women and Sustainable Peace)

In this workshop, the Platform Women and Sustainable Peace invited speakers and audience to exploring sources of inspiration from various religions, faiths and humanism.

Anke Polak, speaking on behalf on Humanism elaborates on the relationship of humanism and peace. She explains how the humanists do not have sacred scriptures they get their inspiration from. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights are important as a framework for freedom, justice and humanity; human dignity for all.

Greetje Witte, protestant, shared a few texts from the Bible, which inspire her. She spoke about peace within the Church and noted that it's not always a peaceful as one might expect. When she realized that years back, she joined discussion groups to share her thoughts on this. It's important to share ideas on, and read and reinterpret sacred texts together.

Putri Gayatri Pertiwi shared a few quotes from the Qu'ran which inspire her. For her, Islam means 'to surrender to peace'. The Qu'ran was written approximately 1400 years ago and Putri notes how culture and religion are sometimes interwoven in the Holy Book. It's important to make a distinction between these and translate key messages to present times.

Janne Poort – van Eeden was raised as a Christian. She finds her inspiration for her peace work in the conviction that people are part of a unity, in which each has his or her own responsibility. She notes that the core essence of religion is separate from the institution religion and church, and elaborates on the commonalities of all religions; one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself, and the need to love one another. She shared a poem from Anton van Duinkerken.

Janny Beekman shared about the inspiration she finds in Buddhism. She elaborates on the importance of living mindful. Through meditation, one gains understanding that one is not an integral, autonomous entity and that everything is interconnected and interdependent. The well-being and happiness of people surrounding you, is as important as your own. She shares some poems and writing from Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

A participant from the audience shared about African spiritual and religious traditions, and how they have been influenced by Christianity. She elaborates on the value of these for conflict resolution, and in particular the value the Bible has as being a connecting factor.

At the end of the workshop, a participant notes that the various religions and spiritual beliefs have something in common; the need to belong and be part of a community and looking for connection. Understanding and awareness raising of the commonalities between religions and beliefs is important.

Interfaith Peacebuilding, Women and 1325 (by Multicultural Women Peacemakers Network)

In this workshop Doris B. Alfafara, born in Mindanao – The Philippines and board member of the Multicultural Women Peacemakers Network, elaborates on peacebuilding efforts in Mindanao.

Mindanao is the second largest and easternmost island in the Philippines. Conflict in Mindanao has been persisting for decades. Historically, indigenous groups were converted to Islam when Muslim traders from Indonesia and Malaysia arrived in Mindanao. In the 16th century, Spain subdued most parts of The Philippines, and converted indigenous groups into Christianity. Yet, they never succeeded in controlling Mindanao. After the end of the Philippine – American war

(early 1900's), most of the island was brought under central control. However, tensions remained between central government and Mindanao. In the 1960's Christians increasingly settled in Mindanao (encouraged by deliberate policies from the central government in Manila). Overall, the majority of inhabitants in Mindanao is Christian, while in central and southwestern regions have a Muslim majority.

While religious differences have shaped the conflict, it is often not identified as the main causal factor of the conflict. Clashes of interests in land, and other natural resources, the right to self-determination and identity issues are important causal factors of the conflict. For instance, the indigenous groups (Lumads) have historically been pushed aside from their land by Spanish and American colonizers, Muslim groups and Christian settlers. However, over the years, generations have settled there, and their rights can not be ignored either. The tensions and conflict between the three different groups (Christian settlers, Muslim groups named Moro, and the indigenous groups named Lumads) is a complex situation. In addition, internal divisions within the groups complicate the situation even more.

In the 1980's, when the leaders of the three groups came together, the concept of Tri-People Peacebuilding was born. The Tri-People Approach emphasizes the existence of the three peoples which have to share Mindanao, the ideal of their equality and unity, and Mindanao itself as the basis of a new or additional identity as Mindanaoan or Mindanawon. Working on this basis, it's crucial that the three groups are always represented in peacebuilding efforts.

Doris spoke about the challenge in terms of addressing gender issues in these interfaith peacebuilding efforts. For instance, in the so-called "Zones of Peace", elders sit together and consult all three groups. However, religious leaders and elders participating in these "zones of peace" are mainly men. Active lobby from women's groups is taking place to include women and women's voices in these meetings. Doris elaborated on women's roles in lobby and advocacy. For instance, the Philippines was the first country in Asia to develop and adopt a National Action Plan (NAP) on the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Women's groups have actively worked to make this happen. She notes that proper implementation of the NAP is still lacking however.

Closure

After the workshops, the groups joined together in plenary. Participants from the workshops shared about the discussions and outcomes of the workshops. The facilitator of the day summarized shortly what had been discussed during the day.

IFOR/WPP Program Manager Isabelle Geuskens shared with the audience the WPP follow up plans on faithbased and interfaith based peacebuilding and gender. From October 19 to October 25, 2011, the WPP will organize in collaboration with the New Tactics in Human Rights an online dialogue on this topic entitled "Faith-Based Peacebuilding: Applying a gender perspective". She encouraged the audience to keep track of the WPP website for further information.