



Multicultural SA

South Australian Multicultural & Ethnic Affairs Commission



Government
of South Australia

Women as Peacemakers
Address to the
International Women's Day Luncheon
Adelaide Convention Centre
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by
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Salutations and Acknowledgements

- ❑ Her Excellency, Marjorie Jackson-Nelson, Governor of South Australia
- ❑ Honourable Jane Lomax-Smith, Minister for Education and Children's Services - representing the Premier of South Australia
- ❑ Honourable Stephanie Key, Minister for Women
- ❑ Lady Mayoress, Kathy Harbison - representing the Right Honourable Michael Harbison, Lord Mayor of Adelaide
- ❑ Mr John Kiosoglous, Chairman of the South Australian Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission
- ❑ Ms Tricia Garnett, President of the International Women's Day Committee SA Inc
- ❑ Distinguished Guests, Friends

To Muslims in the audience, ASSALAAMUALAIKUM – PEACE BE WITH YOU

I would also like to acknowledge that I am on Kaurna land and I recognise that the Kaurna people are the original custodians of this land.

Introductory Points

I am honoured to have the opportunity to be here with you today. I thank Ms Tricia Garnett and her organising committee for the invitation.

The organisers have asked me to speak on “Women as Peacemakers”, a topic of prime importance in this uncertain world we live in today. In 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – everyone has the right to life, liberty and security.

Unfortunately, this unconditional right is not shared by everyone. We are confronted with increasing violence in our communities and large-scale conflicts in many parts of the world.

In order to draw attention to the challenges and issues of global violence, and to encourage international action for peace, the United Nations General Assembly in 1997, first proclaimed the year 2000 as the International Year of the Culture of Peace. In 1998, they proclaimed the period 2001-2010 as the **International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World**. The focus of the decade is to promote the implementation of a culture of peace at local, national, regional and international levels, and to ensure that governments will be world leaders in implementing this. Sadly, we witnessed, at the eve of this millennium, a proliferation of regional, local, ethnic, religious and civil conflicts, and terrorism around the world. There is a need for a global transition from a culture of war to a culture of peace.

Further, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted on 31 October 2000, expressed concern that during conflicts, civilians, particularly women and children, account for the vast majority of those displaced, injured or killed. The Resolution affirmed the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peacebuilding.

It is of utmost importance to have women play a prominent role in peacemaking and peacekeeping as such involvement would create a more inclusive and reflective society, less biased towards the perspectives or behaviour of only one segment of society. In this regard, we need a gender perspective on war and peace, taking as its starting point women’s position in society, and highlighting structures of oppression, unequal power relationship and the construction of masculinity and femininity in processes of conflict and peacemaking

In the next few minutes, I would like to highlight the situation of women in armed conflict situations, and the importance of women in peacemaking and peacekeeping roles.

Women in Armed Conflict Situations

War is a gendered activity with a strong division of labour. Most fighters are men; most institutions involved are male-dominated; & definitions of masculinity & femininity are created & mobilised (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2001).

Wars often reinforce women's traditional roles by framing duties & unconditional support of their country's leadership as patriotic. They create a climate in which violence against women & children is acceptable so long as it fulfils the goals of war. While entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict and terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex. Parties to conflict often rape women with impunity, sometimes using systemic rape as a tactic of war and terrorism (Fiji Women's Crisis Centre [FWCC] Platform for Action: Women and Armed Conflict). Rape and other forms of gender-based violence are integral and intrinsic to warfare, and highlight the fact that wars and armed conflicts are but another stage of men's power and control over women.

It is not only during times of armed conflict that women are terrorized. Women and children constitute around 80 percent of the world's millions of refugees and other displaced persons. They are threatened by deprivation of property, goods and services.

In heavily militarized or insecure societies, the general level of violence, including domestic and gender-based violence, increases and becomes a major source of insecurity for women, men and children. For example, we see instances of this in Afghanistan when the Taliban, an extremist militia, upon seizing power in 1996, instituted a system of *gender apartheid* in which women of Afghanistan were stripped of their visibility, voice and mobility. The Taliban uses Islamic arguments to violate the basic human rights of men and women in Afghanistan. As a woman, and a Muslim woman specifically, I want to stress Islam's message of peace, and that all Muslims must continue to raise our voices against oppressive features of cultural traditions or the inhumane practices of Islamist movements and fundamentalist regimes who promote a monolithic and static conceptions of Islam.

Another example of women's situation in heavily militarised societies is that of Burma where the leader of the National League for Democracy, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been under virtual house arrest since the present military junta took power in an election they had not won in 1989. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's courage and persistence in resisting the junta is a beacon of hope for the

country that is suffering from the effects of a heavily militarised regime. However, her health, well-being and safety is a matter of deep concern to the international community

I would also like to draw attention to the plight of hundreds of thousands of people who have had to flee their homes because of oppression at the hands of their own regimes, and taken refuge in many places throughout the world, and even in Australia.

An example I would like to make is that of the Burmese refugees who have taken refuge in many places – in camps along the Thai-Burma border, resettled in third countries, or working illegally in other Southeast Asian countries. In the various refugee camps, the Burmese refugees have built monasteries, temples, mosques and churches, schools and crèches as well as organising camp governments.

Two years ago I accompanied members of the Altsean-Burma Secretariat (the Alternative Association of South East Asian Nations [ASEAN] Network on Burma) to one of these camps. The Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma is an NGO that works with a broad range of people from Southeast Asia and beyond, to promote the cause of human rights and democracy in Burma. At this camp, I witnessed for myself the situation of people who have had to make the camp a more or less permanent place of residence. It was heartbreaking to see the look of permanency of the camp, with its church, crèche, shops, school and houses with bamboo pipes for their running water. Houses were neatly separated from one another with hedges of flowers and shrubs, just as one would encounter in any suburb. At the same time, it was heartening to see that women were prominent in their public role in camp life – running the crèche, working in the school and the shops and organising women's awareness sessions in the camp and liaising with the outside world with the help of NGOs such as the Altsean Burma who are doing a lot to publicise the conditions of the refugees.

All too often, then, in times of war and armed conflict situations, women are the mainstay of their society by taking on additional roles to keep the community functioning and the economy going. Examples of these proliferate, from the situations of women during wartime in Europe, and closer to home, in the countries of Vietnam, Laos, during the Vietnam War, to name a few. My research on the situation of women in the countries of Vietnam and Laos point to the long-term effects that war and the subsequent periods of economic hardship had on women's and children's health and well-being in particular. During that period and the current period when these countries have opened up to market forces, women take on double and triple roles to maintain the family and the

community. During wartime, women had to respond to evolving and difficult environments, making decisions formerly made by males in their communities. These are additional to their role as heads of their households where livelihoods had to be maintained under conditions of deprivation. These responsibilities need to be acknowledged in post-conflict rehabilitation and negotiations.

All too often, in post-conflict situations, it is women who relinquish their freedom. The important role that they play in keeping the economy functioning, in maintaining community cohesion is all too often relegated to the backburners, and they lose the economic independence enjoyed as a consequence of having to take on jobs that had been left vacant by the men. At the same time, it is women who are expected to regain the damage done to their militarised sons, husbands, lovers.

Of serious concern in relation to post-conflict situation is the violation of human rights by peacekeepers. In Malay we have a saying: *harapkan pagar, pagar makan padi* (literally, *We rely on the fence to keep vermin out of the padi field, but it is the fence that has destroyed the padi*). Reports of sexual abuse, torture, even murder, rape in every continent have been documented. These include GI abuses in Kosovo, rape in Somalia by Canadian, Italian & Belgian peacekeepers, violations by Indian peacekeepers in Sri Lanka. In addition, there have been increases in trafficking of women & girls, & an increase in HIV Aids where there are peacekeeping operations. (Women's International League for Peace & Freedom [WILPF], 2002)

Importance of Women in Peacekeeping Roles

Of importance in ensuring women's real involvement in peacekeeping is Resolution 1325, passed by the UN Security Council on 31 October 2000, in which it was acknowledged that "peace is inextricably linked with equality between men and women", and that "the equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflicts are essential for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security". Four inter-related areas of the Resolution relate to the participation of women in decision-making, to their protection in armed conflict situations, to gender mainstreaming in reporting systems and in the ways in which all United Nations programs are implemented, and to the integration of gender perspectives in peacekeeping and the training of peacekeepers (Berlin, 2003).

An anti-militaristic approach to peacekeeping implies that men and women are responsible for changing existing structures in which warfare is a central component and for opening paths to non-

violent interaction between peoples and states. Hence, the importance of having women play a prominent role in peacekeeping. Women's past experiences of violence can be used as a point of departure from which to construct an understanding of violence that makes gender central to the explanation, not because of women's traditional roles or essential biology, but because women stand in a relationship to violence which is unique among oppressed people.

Wars have no neat beginnings and endings. Women who bear the burden of picking up the pieces at the formal cessation of hostilities know that wars do not end at the signing of peace treaties. Women are all too often left with the task of rebuilding the physical infrastructures, along with the men, but also must cope with the terrible consequences – the aftermath of war – the physical, psychological, & economic damages which people suffer.

However, while it is important to acknowledge the suffering that women around the world had to endure as a result of war, women around the world also work tirelessly for peace (Women Waging Peace, 2002).

Women are lobbying at national and international levels for reparation and rehabilitation for gender-based war crimes, the most popular movement being that of the World War II comfort women. Some other steps that have been taken in this regard are:

- ❑ The Netherlands has introduced a program entitled “Engendering the Peace Process” which encourages Israel and Palestine to appoint more women to negotiating teams and political decision-making posts in the on-going Middle East peace process.
- ❑ The African region developed a “First Ladies for Peace Initiative” in early 1997, which has included conferences on peace and humanitarian issues, the resolutions of which have been presented to African heads of states and governments.

In addition, the Organization of African Unity and the Economic Commission of Africa launched the Women's Committee on Peace and Development in 1999.

- ❑ Belgium has initiated a joint project with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) through which women's non-governmental organizations identifies detained children and negotiates their release from rebel soldiers.

Belgium has also supported the use of women as mediators in conflict situations and has developed an initiative for peacebuilding between the women of two parties in conflict.

- ❑ The United Kingdom has taken steps to ensure that women are included in the peace process (Womenwatch 2000).
- ❑ Closer to home, in East Timor, which suffered during 24 years of Indonesian occupation, women have borne much of the brunt of the violence. In independent Timor Leste, Fokupers (East Timorese Women's Communication Forum) has emerged as East Timorese Women's Organization. Supported by Community Aid Abroad, the organization is working on women's health and human rights, and is working to raise awareness of gender, human rights and health issues in the community, and to provide counselling and support for victims of the conflict (Oxfam, 1999).

It must be stressed again that the method of reconstruction and rehabilitation must necessarily be within the empowerment and equality framework. Peace is women's achievement of control over their lives.

For now and the future, women must advocate for peace - in formal and informal peace processes. Together we can

- ❑ Make the case that women make vital contributions to conflict prevention, peace negotiations, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts
- ❑ Shape public policy by generating support from policymakers for women's agency in promoting peace and security, and
- ❑ Build a network of women peacemakers.

I invite you to start meaningful conversations today about building a culture of peace with family, friends, colleagues, neighbours and people you meet in the wider community. This will take courage, faith and time.

As peacemakers we take responsibility for the future of humanity, especially for today's children and those of future generations. I urge you to put into practice the **Manifesto 2000 for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence written by the Nobel Prize Peace Laureates**.

“Respect all life.” Respect the life and dignity of each human being without discrimination and prejudice.

“Reject violence.” Practise active non-violence, rejecting violence in all its forms: physical, sexual, psychological, economical and social, in particular towards the most deprived and vulnerable such as children and adolescents.

“Share with others.” Share my time and material resources in a spirit of generosity to put an end to exclusion, injustice and political and economic oppression.

“Listen to understand.” Defend freedom of expression and cultural diversity, giving preference always to dialogue and listening without engaging in fanaticism, defamation and the rejection of others.

“Preserve the planet.” Promote consumer behaviour that is responsible and development practices that respect all forms of life and preserve the balance of nature on the planet.

“Rediscover solidarity.” Contribute to the development of my community, with the full participation of women and respect for democratic principles, in order to create together new forms of solidarity.

These values, attitudes and forms of behaviour show us that the culture of peace spirals outward - it begins within oneself and the home, spreads out to the community, then on to the regional, national and international levels.

Women as peacemakers can promote non-violence, tolerance, dialogue, reconciliation, justice and solidarity on a daily basis. Together we can inspire a culture of peace!

Thank you.