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By Sakina Yusuf Khan

Sharing Is In Her DNA

It is women who have the strength to pick up the pieces after a conflict, says Dena Merriam, founder and convener of the Global Peace Initiative of Women, in a conversation with Sakina Yusuf Khan.

What brings you to India?

I have been working in the inter-faith movement since the 1990s. My organisation, GPIW, brings spiritual resources to help address critical global problems. We have organised a Sufi-Yogi dialogue for peace here in Rishikesh with participants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, the US, Europe and India.

Can inter-faith dialogue really help in promoting world peace?



What I see happening is that a small group of people who have been doing this for some years are moving beyond inter-faith dialogue to united action. We call it inter-faith dialogue, but we are actually doing much more. We are bonding as a community, deepening our sense of unity so that we can act together.

Do you think spiritual leaders can achieve what political leaders have failed to?

I see no other way of bringing world peace but with the help of spiritual leaders. We need political action. We need economic mobilisation; we need spiritual mobilisation. Whether it is for peace or climate change, concerted action is needed. The spiritual community has a vital role to play in all this. If spiritual leaders from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan can work together, there could be a major shift in the peace scenario in the region for the common good.

What makes you so optimistic?

The problem is in the divisions that are being created. There is too much polarisation. People keep saying, "You are different from me. You are the other." We need to change this. We need to say, "We are one family". India, Pakistan, Afghanistan are one family, one community with common roots. How do we discover our common roots? Not by focusing on our differences. We need to have a common vision. Even as a world community, the challenge now is to focus on our commonalities.

How can spiritual leaders help resolve conflict?

The world has been in the grip of conflict for the last decade or so. Terrorism has created a blanket of fear in many parts of the world. How do we overcome this fear? The only way is by generating a force

of love that is more powerful than fear. When you are afraid of something and somebody puts a loving arm around you, it gives you strength. It gives you the courage and confidence to overcome fear. That's what the world needs right now, the healing hug of love.

Spiritual leaders can do this in a big way. They can spread the message of love and oneness. People need to forget minor differences and love each other again.

We have to make this love a reality and not just a word or concept.

Do you think women have a different way of dealing with conflict situations?

Yes, we work in a different way. Women are consensus builders. We are much more inclusive. We are able to share more. Sharing is in the DNA of women.

I have seen that when women sit together, they are able to identify commonalities in no time. That is because we share our motherhood. We share our experience of how to keep the family together, our biological family. Now, we have to extend that to the human family and beyond.

Is there a difference in the way women are affected by conflict?

Every study has shown that most victims of conflict are women and children. They are the worst affected. We have seen that in every major conflict area, whether it is Palestine, Afghanistan or Sudan. It is always women who are most traumatised.

At the same time, it is women who have the strength to pick up the pieces after a conflict.

In Rwanda, it was the women who healed the country. It was women who adopted orphans of other tribes. They were able to overcome their differences and reach out because women are givers, they are sustainers. I saw that in Afghanistan, too. Afghan women are not so visible but they have a lot of courage in them.

And I'm really hoping that the women of India and Pakistan lead men to a sense of unity that needs to develop here, because they share their history and culture. Women are able to tap that more easily. Not that men can't do it, but it comes more naturally to women.

Women have a vital role to play in bringing about this understanding of human unity and universal togetherness.

