

Chicago Tribune

Women urge larger role in easing world's ills

By Laurie Goering | Foreign correspondent

March 11, 2008

JAIPUR, India — Of nearly 200 nations worldwide, just 14 are run by women presidents or prime ministers. Only nine of 189 ambassadors to the United Nations are women. And by most accounts, women hold less than 1 percent of corporate management positions worldwide.

That may have more than a little to do with why so many people in the world remain poor, hungry, ill, uneducated and at war, argued women leaders from around the world at a conference, which ended Monday, aimed at finding ways to get women more involved in solving international conflicts.

“We are not able to change the world simply by repeating over and over and over again answers that have not worked, that do not work and that will not work,” said Sister Joan Chittister, an American Benedictine nun, social psychologist and co-chairwoman of the Global Peace Initiative of Women, which organized the conference of 450 participants from 45 countries in Jaipur.

Failing to take into account women's priorities and strategies “is a burden the human race cannot afford,” Chittister said. “We lack the leadership potential of over half the human race. We are here to begin to right that imbalance.”

The four-day conference brought together women from conflict zones around the world and top female spiritual leaders. It was aimed at forging formal ties among Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain and animist women with the goal of exploring ideas for resolving conflicts and creating a World Council of Women Spiritual Leaders.

That body, which grew out of a suggestion by former UN Secretary General Kofi An-

nan, might be called upon to send members to arbitrate conflicts, critique government and international policies, help set policy agendas or issue statements in crisis moments, including speaking out jointly against religious extremism.

“One of the things we see as possible is to go into areas where there is conflict and cross the lines, [to go] where they say, ‘These people don't talk to each other,’ “ said Rev. Joan Brown Campbell, the first female secretary general of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA and chairwoman of the Global Peace Initiative of Women. Women across the world see peace and education as priorities and know that “reconciliation based on justice is the glue that heals broken relationships,” Campbell said.

Among the high-profile women strategizing at the conference were Sheikha Cemalnur Sargut, a Turkish Islamic leader; Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, a leading Tibetan Buddhist nun; Anandmurti Gurumaa, a well-known Hindu mystic; Maryam Zarif, an Iranian Islamic expert; and Pascale Warda, an Assyrian Christian and former minister of immigration and displacement in Iraq's first post-Saddam Hussein government.

Emphasis on dialogue

While noting that bringing women to positions of power wouldn't automatically reduce conflict—women have played roles in perpetuating war and corruption in more than a few nations or have been ineffectual leaders—participants called the conference itself an example of what women with a talent for compassion, forgiveness and building trust might accomplish in resolving conflict.

“The moment people are in dialogue they no longer demonize each other: I'm not the occupier, and you're no longer the terrorist,” said Rabbi Naamah Kelman, dean of Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. She at one point shared the stage with Iran's Zarif, a moment she called “a start” to better relations

between the two rival nations.

“We have to take steps into territory where we are uncomfortable, where we are afraid, and establish some connection,” urged Donna Markham, a Dominican nun from Toronto.

'Desperate' need to act

Hala Al-Saraf, head of the Iraq Health Access Program, said she is convinced the Shiite-Sunni divide splitting Iraq is in large part a religious cover for underlying economic and political competition among those vying for power.

Al-Saraf, who runs a conflict-resolution program for widows of husbands killed in sectarian violence, said she tells the women that “your problem is not your Sunni neighbor; it's not having a job,” a message that she said needs to be broadcast more widely in the country.

Sakena Yacoobi, president of the Afghan Institute of Learning, similarly insisted that what the Taliban and other extremists in her country are preaching “is not Islam,” and that by carrying out more suicide bombings, kidnappings and burnings of schools, “these people have done so many bad things in the name of religion that people question even it [the religion].”

Afghans, exhausted by 30 years of conflict, “would follow a religious leader who says, ‘This is not Islam,’ “ she said. She believes that “if women are allowed leadership and space, they can bring peace.”

At the conference, women leaders emphasized the urgency of not just searching for solutions to conflicts but finding ways to rapidly put them into action.

“I hope this conference will not stay at the level of words and pious aspirations,” said Palmo, the Buddhist nun. “Practical application is what we are desperately in need of.”