

April 19, 2010

**Remarks by
Consul General Beth A. Payne
on
“Women Empowerment in Advancing World Peace”
Jadavpur University
April 19, 2010**

Dear students, and the Faculty members of the Department of International Relations,
Jadavpur University,
Fellow panelists,
Namashkar

I am very pleased to be here to speak on the very important issue of how empowering women can advance world peace or, should I say, why we will not achieve world peace until we empower women. I am particularly honored because Jadavpur University, founded on the principal of empowering people by imparting knowledge, has a long and rich history of contributing to the empowerment of the people of West Bengal.

While the number and severity of inter-state armed conflicts have declined significantly since World World II, there continues to be a plethora of internal armed conflicts around the globe that undermine efforts to provide stability and prosperity. Why are we falling short? Why have we been unable to put an end to violent conflict? I would argue that one of the main reasons is that we continue to ignore the single, greatest under-utilized resource available to us - women. Peace-building efforts will not be fully effective if we do not draw on the expertise, insights, and ideas of half the population.

In conflict situations, women are much more disadvantaged compared to men. Women tend to be the most vulnerable victims of various forms of violence, from domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, to sexual torture and other types of sexual violence. They also suffer disproportionately from displacement and deprivation. But focusing on women only as victims of conflicts ignores the fact that women play significant roles before, during and after the conflicts, and reinforces existing traditional gender values and practices that women are only “passive” and “subservient” in peace and politics. This has negative consequences in overlooking women’s potential as key actors in peace-building processes and activities.

I do not subscribe to the belief that if women ruled the world we would have peace and tranquility. Women have the same faults and foibles as men and I've seen enough women resort to violence to know that leadership by women alone is not the answer. I do believe, however, that women have unique skills and capabilities and when societies exclude them from leadership roles and limit their participation in conflict prevention and peace building, we are not going to achieve our goal of reducing violent conflict.

In order to prevent violence, it is necessary to address hostile mistrust and belligerence before it reaches a point where each side believes that violence is their only recourse. The goal of prevention is to create a situation in which differences and conflicts can be addressed in a nonviolent and constructive manner. Successful conflict resolution often involves dialogue between opposing communities, non-violent demonstrations, empowering oppressed groups, and other peace building efforts.

Social science research indicates that women generally are more collaborative than men and thus more inclined toward consensus and compromise. Women often use their role as mothers to cut across international borders and internal divides. When women are left out of the political process, we lose opportunities to reach across the divide to better understand those with whom we have a conflict.

Once conflict has become violent, peace negotiations involve the parties agreeing upon courses of action, bargaining for individual or collective advantage, and reaching a compromise to end the conflict. Mediation is a process of alternative dispute resolution that attempts to bring two states, sides, or parties together by having an impartial third party facilitate. Unfortunately, there are very few female peace negotiators. While women often play the role of mediator in families and have become practiced listeners and adept at reaching compromise, they are rarely called upon to mediate between belligerents in an armed conflict.

Women, however, make excellent mediators. Because of our status as second-class citizens, we have become adept at finding innovative ways to cope with problems. Also, both male and female mediators suggest that the presence of a woman in negotiations promotes a less aggressive atmosphere. One (male) negotiations specialist describes how ‘female archetypes can bypass the tango of male egos’, helping to bring down the temperature without anyone losing face. Charm is an almost indispensable skill for peace negotiators and women have a lot of it. Women in negotiation processes are often able to make people comfortable and create an atmosphere of warmth and humor. Dolly Madison, wife of our fourth president, while limited by the restrictions of the time, played a decided role in calming friction within the Congress by her grace and charm which she employed freely.

Negotiators sometimes worry that having women participate in the discussion may change the tone of the meeting. They’re right. A British participant in the Northern Ireland peace talks insightfully noted that when the parties became bogged down by abstract issues and past offenses, “the women would come and talk about their loved ones, their bereavement, their children and their hopes for the future.” These deeply personal comments, rather than being a diversion, helped keep the talks focused. The women’s experiences reminded the parties that security for all citizens was what really mattered.

Women can also often have access to the belligerents because they are often viewed as less threatening. In Papua New Guinea, women went to the jungles to find their sons and convinced them to lay down arms and come to the negotiating table.

The most sensitive time in ending conflict is after an agreement has been reached and combatants are being demobilized, disarmed and reintegrated into society. If not done well,

peace becomes temporary as combatants return to what is often the only life they know - fighting a war.

Post-conflict reconstruction is the process of rebuilding administrative and governance capacities, repairing physical infrastructure, establishing functioning financial infrastructures and economic restructuring, establishing a credible and functioning judicial system, ensuring social well-being, and restoring internal security. Participants often include international organizations, financial institutions, members of civil society, and government leaders, both domestic and international. Study upon study has shown that aid given to women is reinvested in their communities, and skills-development programs turn women into drivers of economic growth.

El Salvador's disarmament and reintegration of combatants after the end of their civil war ended is an important role model. Since there were women combatants, there were also women involved in peace negotiations and post-conflict initiatives. A study of success highlighted that women had a clear sense of responsibility for the thousands of FMLN supporters and sought to ensure their wellbeing. Marginalized communities, including female-headed households, also received support and land benefits. This spread the benefits and impact of the reintegration efforts and contributed to its long-term success.

Reconciliation is also an important part of ending the cycle of violence and conflict. Reconciliation is about transforming relationships. The traumas of those affected must be considered, understood and reconciled. This cannot take place without the input of women as well as men.

As you can see, empowering women is not a choice. To achieve peace and stability we must empower women for the status of women is a bellwether for not only the political and economic health of nations but our stability and security as well. And, to those women out there - don't wait to be invited to the negotiation table - demand to be a part of the political decision making, the mediation efforts and the post conflict reconstruction.

As women we have a responsibility to speak out and insist on our rightful place in peace building. Without this active participation in conflict resolution and empowering women, we condemn ourselves to a status quo that has not served our civilization well.
