

## SESSION SUMMARY: ON THE OCCASION OF THE 55<sup>TH</sup> SESSION OF UNITED NATIONS' COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN



***Religions for Peace* Women's Mobilization Program discusses pivotal role of Women of Faith as agents of peace**

**—Celebrates the launch of *UN Women* with a panel session on Religion, Women, and Conflict—**

(NEW YORK, 25 February 2011)—The *Religions for Peace* Global Women of Faith Network—in partnership with International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), *Say NO UNiTE* to End Violence against Women, and Al-Hakim Foundation—organized an interactive panel on “***Religion, Women, and Conflict: Preventing Violence Against Women***” on 25 February 2011. The event was convened at the Church Center for the United Nations in New York on the occasion of the 55<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, which is being attended by the thousands of women's representatives from around the world.

The panel session highlighted the unique challenges of attaining maternal health and stopping violence against women in conflict and post-conflict situations. It focused on real examples of the good work being done by faith-based organizations and communities, and it also illustrated how other organizations are engaging with faith-based organizations to achieve mutual goals.

**Ms. Jacqueline Ogega**, Director of the *Religions for Peace* Women of Faith Network, opened the session by highlighting the pivotal roles that religious communities play in averting violence and transforming armed conflicts. Ms. Ogega emphasized religious communities' deep potential to eliminate violence against women and promote just and harmonious societies for women and children in both conflict and post-conflict situations.

**Ms. Urjasi Rudra**, UN Women, stressed the importance of religious communities' roles during conflict. “They can work as connectors when conflict erupts,” she remarked. “As a partner of the *Say NO* Campaign, *Religions for Peace* rolled out *Say No* to its faith communities in 2007 and 2008. These efforts contributed significantly to signatures acquisitions for our petition. *Religions for Peace* has continued to work through its religious networks by launching their own initiative called *Restoring Dignity – End Violence Against Women*, which engaged religious youth through simple activities like

poster competitions. *Religions for Peace* was among the most active organizations,” stated Ms. Rudra.

**Ms. Layla Alkhafaji**, Al-Hakim Foundation, Iraq, called on all people of faith to counter the misuse of religion in violating the rights and dignity of women. “Islam strongly condemns violence against women in all its forms and manifestations,” Ms. Alkhafaji emphasized.

**Ms. Facia Harris**, World Student Christian Federation of Liberia, illuminated the challenges of maternal health among young women in post-conflict Liberia stating that “There is a huge number of young women in Liberia who are pregnant, with lack of family support, lack of sex education, and living in extreme poverty. This leads to other problems such as fistula, and it is compounded by HIV/AIDS. There should be structures to incorporate these young people to help them get their lives back on track.” Ms. Harris shared an example of young people helping other youth in solidarity to prevent and end fistula. Through their networks, these young Liberians are ending fistula among young women through education, bible study, home visitations, referrals to hospitals for treatment and conducting advocacy.

**Dr. Jasmin Nario Galace**, Center for Peace Education in The Philippines, explained that the roots of the conflict in Mindanao are socio-economic in nature, but they have been exacerbated by religious differences. “Lives have to be saved. Too often people are killed from violence and poverty; women and girls die because of sexual violence. It is a call of our faith. Humans often use religion as justification for cruelty, hate, and violence. But faith traditions teach differently,” Dr. Galace stressed. Her work at a Catholic college in the Philippines focuses on education to help develop women peace builders. Her goals are to challenge the “war system” by training students to manage conflicts constructively; teaching women to become peer mediators; advocating for arms control; advocating for the observance of international laws and treaties for disarmament and peace; emphasizing the need to protect women and children in times of war; campaigning for awareness of resolution 1325; teaching the shared beliefs of the world’s major traditions and organizing national and regional interfaith workshops for teachers and educators.

**Sister Leonida Kwamboka**, Women for Women in Africa Foundation showed a video of the situation of women and girls in Kibera, which is the second largest slum in Africa and located in Nairobi, Kenya. The situation of insecurity and violence is often exacerbated in situations of conflict, such as the post-election violence in Nairobi in 2007. “Imagine a situation where a son threatens to rape the mother because he is in a gang and takes drugs in the slum. The situation is really bad. Education is the most important demand from women because it enables them to transcend the challenges and become more knowledgeable and economically empowered. There is so much religion in Kibera, people really believe, but the one that really affects people is the traditional religion. For example, women believe that something bad will happen to them if they try to improve themselves. This superstition keeps women at the bottom. That is why education is central for both children and adult women,” Sister Leonida stressed.

**Delores Scott Brathwaite, Esq.**, Westchester County Human Rights Commission, spoke of her work to protect victims and prosecutes the perpetrators of violence against women in the United States. “Legislation is essential and I am proud of the work of Westchester County that led to the formulation of necessary law. The legislation came through as a result of work with other organizations, including faith-based organizations. It is the only law that protects women and victims of domestic violence in both employment and housing, and provides full services to survivors.”

The session was opened by **Dr. Brenda Smith**, World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women and a member of the North American Women of Faith Network. She spoke of the pivotal role that religion can play in promoting the wellbeing of women and children.

“Our take away is to have faith, to have hope, to be able to have a force to know there is a better day ahead,” **Rabbi Sarah Reines**, Women’s Rabbinic Network, concluded at the end of the event.

**UN Women**, formally known as the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, was launched on 24 February 2011 and will support individual countries in moving towards gender equality in economics and politics, as well as work to end violence against women. UN Women will assist in setting international standards for progress and lead coordinated UN efforts to make new opportunities for women and girls central to all UN programmes for development and peace.

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**RELIGIONS FOR PEACE**—the world’s largest and most representative multi-religious coalition—advances common action among the world’s religious communities for peace. *Religions for Peace* works to transform violent conflict, advance human development, promote just and harmonious societies, and protect the earth. The global *Religions for Peace* network comprises a World Council of senior religious leaders from all regions of the world; six regional inter-religious bodies and more than eighty national ones; and the Global Women of Faith Network and Global Youth Network.