

Spiritual Women's Peace Meet

Women, whose voices have been ignored for so long in the hierarchies that run all religious institutions, are discovering powerful new methods to advance their work for a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world. This was abundantly clear as hundreds of women gathered from October 6 to 9, 2002 in Geneva, Switzerland for the Global Peace Initiative of Spiritual and Religious Women. As Aung San Suu Kyi, opposition leader in Burma, said in a videotaped message to the conference, "It is spiritual values that make it possible to face the problems. Women's roles must not be limited by traditions and prejudice."

The conference was a follow-up to the Millennium World Peace Summit held in 1999 in New York, at which there were complaints that there were too few women and grassroots leaders. Despite being granted use of the General Assembly hall, the conference was not greeted by any United Nations officer—with the notable exception of the new United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, His Excellency Sergio Viera de Mello. He came at his own request to assure the women leaders that he would make the issue of violence against women a top priority. The conference was also boycotted for unstated reasons by certain major world religious organizations, including the World Council of Churches. However there were many strong speakers from groups whose voices are not usually heard, including a six-woman delegation from Afghanistan and a five-person group of indigenous New Zealand Maoris. Committed women of means had paid their own expenses so that they could attend the conference. The energy, truthfulness, and social dedication of the women spiritual and religious leaders invited to the Geneva conference was quite remarkable.

Her Holiness Sri Mata Amritanandamayi likened women to elephants who are trained as babies to be docile by being tied by strong chains to big trees. They soon learn

that they cannot free themselves. When they become adult elephants, they can be tied by a thin rope to small trees because it never occurs to them that they could easily break free. Amma is encouraging and consecrating women to perform Vedic rites, asserting that prohibitions against women's active involvement in *puja* did not exist in ancient India.

As the Right Reverend Vashti Murphy McKenzie, Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, put it, "Peace founders on the silence of good women." Rev. McKenzie's action plan includes these steps: Have compassion for those caught in acts of violence, making our circle wide enough to include those who don't look like us; Teach our children that nobody wins war; Teach our children to be sensitive to others' uniqueness; Know that all of us have a choice of how to respond when we are faced by evil and violence; Stand firm in the power of our convictions; Commit ourselves to being bridge-builders; Know that despair is the enemy of peace; Believe that we can change things.

Eschewing mainstream barriers to women's spiritual leadership, many of the delegates have initiated transformation projects that are succeeding even though they are being run on a shoestring without the recognition or support of the entrenched patriarchal hierarchies of power.

Mary Pat Fisher, New Delhi

Death of a Doctor

Many years ago, when I returned to India after completing my studies in the U.S., I was on a career cross-road like umpteen other NRIs: I asked myself, should I work in India or should I go back to those green-backed options which I knew could be mine? After a

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year or two at Delhi University colleges, I finally settled down to work for the premier engineering Institute in Delhi. I thought the students were exciting and I harboured an illusion that I had something to say.

My family in the meantime was unable to take the brutal reality of an ordinary Indian working day; they left for the States one by one – first daughter, then son, and eventually even the dear husband. "Come with us," they said, "you will be sorry if you stay behind." "Someone has to." I said each time. "If the best leave the country, the rest is for the rest", was my continuous comment as I hung on by the skin of my teeth to my lonely existence. Each passing year brought its certain grief and an occasional accidental achievement.

Last month was the end of whatever had been my professional life. I had given 28 years to the Institute I worked for. As the day of my retirement neared I thought of all the things I had participated in which might have made a difference. In my mind I was waiting for a debriefing session – an academic *tete-a-tete*. There was so much to be said—after all, the show must go on.

It seems to me now that even 28 years of Indian employment had taught me nothing. I was still as naive as I ever was. There was of course no call—several Deans notwithstanding. On the last day I was told to be present at a ritual where the head of the Institute ticked off five or six of us retirees-to-be—one *safai karamachari* (sweeper), one gentleman from water supplies, one electricity maintenance man, the library lady, and one other professor, who happened to be born in July, like me.

As I listened to the sentimental banalities uttered by each of us, I was certain for the first time in my life that the country of my choice had wasted me indeed!

Sunita Jain, New Delhi □