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Can women find unique ways out of war?

Women leaders from 45 nations meet in India this week to discuss their role in conflict resolution.

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New Delhi

Sakena Yacoobi well knows the hardships of Afghan women, caught between a war and the hopelessness of poverty and illiteracy.

Yet on International Women's Day Saturday, the Afghan educator will not ask the world to help Afghan women. Instead, she will ask Afghan women to help the world.

In a time of growing conflict around the world, she believes the wisdom and compassion of women can offer a way out. "Women bring tolerance and patience," she says. "Women can bring solutions – we cannot accomplish that with weapons."

She is one of several hundred prominent female leaders from 45 countries who have come to India this week to seek ways to raise women's voices worldwide, hoping that their ideas – so often ignored – begin to move the world away from war.

It is a unique approach to International Women's Day – and intentionally so, says Dena Merriam, who has organized "Making Way for the Feminine," a five-day conference that began Thursday in Jaipur.

"This is not about empowering women," says Ms. Merriam, who also co-chaired the United Nations' Millennium World Peace Summit in 2000. "It is about how women can transform society to help us find new ways of addressing conflict."

There are men here, too. The goal, participants say, is not to antagonize men. Yet each believes that women bring to the issue of conflict resolution a different perspective. Many liken it to that of a mother, stern but caring, and more open to finding alternatives to violence.

That perspective is sorely needed, they say, as the path of power and aggression has led only to more fighting and division. "The feminine gifts of compassion, empathy, and caring prepare women for the urgent role as leaders and reconcilers," said the Rev. Joan Brown Campbell, chairwoman of the Global Peace Initiative for Women, at the opening press conference.

"This is about whether women, with men as their partners, can chart a new course," continues Ms. Campbell, who has worked with leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bill Clinton.

The outlines of that new course can be seen in the lives of those attending, both men and women.

It is evident in the compassion of Ali Abu Awwad, a Palestinian who has been imprisoned for his family's political activities and whose brother was killed in the second intifada, yet started a foundation for Israelis and Palestinians who have lost relatives in the conflict.

"The idea is to show people that if you are in the peaceful way, you are not alone," he says. "You do not need to be afraid."

It is evident in the activities of Ms. Yacoobi, who operated secret schools for girls in Afghanistan during Taliban rule, and has since expanded her activities to eight provinces. While other schools have been burned or destroyed, hers have not, she says, because she is a part of the community and knows their needs.

"When the people trust you, they will protect you," she says.

In this is one of the lessons she is bringing to Jaipur. "You have to listen to the communities – to listen to their needs. You can't just depend on weapons," she says, suggesting that connection to the community tends to be a stronger trait among women than men. "We need people to listen to us, not to order us."

These are the voices that this conference hopes to amplify and inspire. Organizer Merriam acknowledges that the conference has an enormous task. The intent is to begin to change how the world thinks about power – spreading the notion that nonviolent solutions are practical and not the fruit of weakness.

Her tools, she says, are the participants themselves. With few women voices in the corridors of power, the hope is to kindle greater awareness and confidence among women so they become more active participants in demanding a solution.

"We can start by critiquing the policies that are creating the pain," said Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, at the press conference. "I might not have all the answers, but I cannot sit by in silence while the policies are destroying the very people I care about."

In recognition of the fact that many of the world's conflicts come from a clash of faiths, the conference has an overtly religious theme. It is bringing together female spiritual leaders from all faiths – such as an Islamic scholar, Buddhist nun, Hindu guru, and members of the Christian clergy.

To this end, Merriam hopes the conference will bring a World Council of Women Spiritual Leaders, which would be a mechanism to guide and advance more inclusive solutions to global problems.

Yet many of the attendees say the gathering in itself, regardless of its outcome, enables them to carry out their work.

Yacoobi needs such spiritual refreshment, she says frankly. "Coming here allows me to collect myself from all the things going on in Afghanistan," she says. "This war is destroying our country, our religion, and our faith, but coming here and seeing these people gives me a lot of energy to believe."

A psychologist in the West Bank, Laila Atshan, too, sees the worst of war – wives who have lost husbands and sons in the conflict with Israel. "I will go back stronger to give them strength," she says. For years, she has considered opening an interfaith community center. "I am hoping this will give me the guts to go do it."

So is Merriam: "The goal is to provide space for people to have a transformational moment – to have people come away so moved that they bring it back to their communities."

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