

Western women can come to the rescue of the world

BY VICTOR CHAN, SPECIAL TO THE SUN JANUARY 25, 2010

At the Vancouver Peace Summit last September, the Dalai Lama said something that ricocheted around the globe. He said that he is a feminist. And he opined that Western women will save the world.

For me this conjured up an unsettling image of blond-haired, blue-eyed amazons riding to the rescue. Not quite what I would expect a figure of his stature to say. Not if his or her coterie of marketing and polling gurus could help it. But the Dalai Lama, true to form, does not pay attention to politically correct niceties. The blogosphere and Twitter went off scale. Some people loved it; not a few rolled their eyes.

Perhaps the Dalai Lama was moved to make this remark because he was in the company of some very impressive Western women, women who have devoted their lives to helping the downtrodden.

There were, of course, the three Nobel peace laureates: Mairead Maguire, Jody Williams and Betty Williams. But also at the table was Mary Robinson, most beloved of all Irish presidents and a tireless human rights activist. Susan Davis was there too. Her humanitarian work has impacted the lives of millions in Haiti, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and several African countries.

Abigail Disney presented her widely praised film, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, which tells the story of a group of determined Liberian women who ousted dictator Charles Taylor and installed Africa's first female president. Both Disney and Swanee Hunt, another panellist, have made significant contributions to turning that small country around.

The Dalai Lama, like his great friend Archbishop Desmond Tutu, does not mince words when it comes to women. He has said on numerous occasions that he inherited his prodigious compassion from his mother. He believes that women, with their nurturing instinct, are naturally more compassionate. He wants to see more female ministers of defence, and is delighted that Spain has one. If wars are a fact of life, then it would be better if women were in charge, according to him, since they are more likely to empathize with those who suffer during conflicts.

The Dalai Lama was also captivated by what Fazle Hasan Abed, a male of the species, had to say about women and the role they have played in his decades-long effort to alleviate suffering in the developing world.

Abed is not quite a household name, although he will soon receive a knighthood from the Queen, the first Bangladeshi to receive this honour since 1943. His organization, BRAC, delivers education, health care and microfinance to millions of people in Asia and Africa. With an annual budget in excess of \$1 billion, BRAC has given \$6 billion in small loans to women.

Why women, the Dalai Lama wanted to know. Abed understands from experience that they pose a low credit risk. And more importantly, as study after study shows, they tend to reinvest their profits in family and community. Abed believes that girls and women represent the greatest untapped resources of the developing world, that they are the key to solving some of its most pressing challenges.

