

International Conference Of Women As Partners For Peace

Kigali, Rwanda / June 24-30, 2000

a report by

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RESOLVED, that the International Conference of Women as Partners for Peace appeals to all African governments and Heads of State to expeditiously ratify the Kigali Declaration 2000, and to include civil society, particularly the women, in peace and negotiation processes.

Prepared for Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children Board of Directors Meeting, September 16, 2000, New York, NY. 2000 International Conference of Women as Partners for Peace

Despite countless African peace initiatives and conferences, Africa remains a battlefield. Macro-level talks have produced neither peace nor progress. Whatever practical benefit that may result from macro-level peace initiatives has yet to touch the micro-level lives of individual, grassroots African women. This failure indicates a need to involve grassroots women in peace building. After all, they are the ultimate stakeholders among the communities in conflict.

On June 24-30, 2000, the International Conference of Women as Partners for Peace met in Kigali, Rwanda to address the need to include women in negotiating resolutions to the violent conflicts that affect most regions in Africa. The conference emphasized the need for women to have access to and full participation in peace processes at both the micro and macro levels. Conference participants produced the Kigali Declaration 2000, a call for the participation of women and of civil society in peace and negotiation processes.

The conference drew participants from the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes Regions, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. There were many well-accomplished, committed, and remarkable women at the conference. Facilitators, trainers, and educators, coming from within and outside Africa, shared with the participants their experiences and expertise in politics, conflict resolution, negotiation, and peace building. Participants from South Africa, Bosnia, and other countries described problems faced during the post-conflict phase of the reconciliation process.

President of Rwanda H.E. Paul Kagame opened the conference. Among the speakers were Ambassador Swanee Hunt (US) founder of Women Waging Peace and Dr. Lakech Dirasse UNIFEM Regional Director, East, Central, and Horn of Africa.

My purpose in attending the conference was to represent the Women's Commission and to share with African women our experience of violent conflict in Sudan and how grassroots women there are working to wage peace.

Putting Peace Building into Practice

The Kigali conference was intentionally practical. Each day offered workshops formulating strategies for conflict resolution, leadership, consensus building, and skills in making. Women learned how to organize for political action, prepare for political leadership, manage electoral campaigns, organize parliamentary caucuses, and build bridges between women groups and NGOs. Topics discussed in four workshops included how to organize grassroots women as advocates for peace, how to acquire public speaking skills, how to use the power of persuasion, and how to run for public office. From the workshops, an agenda with four specific actors emerged:

1. Launching "Women as Partners for Peace in Africa" as an initiative originating from Africa, but including women's peace initiatives worldwide.
2. Developing the "Women as Partners for Peace: Kigali Declaration 2000" (copy attached); a model emphasizing women as full participants in peace and negotiation processes at both macro and micro level.
3. Developing a logo for Women as Partners for Peace (copy attached).
4. Forming regional coalitions with specific strategies (see addendum). All representatives of the regions of conflict were represented, such as the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes, and ECOWAS, they joined to form coalitions to address the humanitarian and refugee concerns in Africa. I joined the Rwanda, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan Coalition 2000.

Developing Communication and Negotiation Skills

Inability to communicate and negotiate effectively is one of the primary obstacles to grassroots women's involvement in the community. Peace building stands or falls on the quality of communications throughout the conflict resolution and reconciliation process. This is why the Kigali Declaration proposed the development of a program of training in communication and negotiation skills for women. This training would not only prepare women leaders to take their rightful place at higher and lower-level peace negotiations, but would empower the learners to teach the skills to other women. Top level Accords such as the Kigali Declaration are but a small step toward achieving sustainable peace in Africa. A well-planned program of communication and negotiation skill training would

enhance the ability of women at the grassroots to step forward, speak to their interests, and secure their rights at all levels in society.

During a conference discussion on macro-level peace building, the participants analysed the diverse peace initiatives in Africa, such as the Netherlands initiative, the Norwegian initiative, and others. It was noted that because organizations and governments external to Africa are financing these activities, the African people do not have a sense of ownership over the peace process. Furthermore, regarding the participation of women, these peace initiatives are coordinated at the international level, where elite women are dominant and grassroots women are excluded. This exclusion is in part because the majority of women at the grassroots level in most African countries lack the training and experience to have any impact beyond the family or, at most, the clan level. Because the elite women live in isolation from the grassroots and rural people, their initiatives lack both vision and follow-up action that either involve the grassroots women or deliver a tangible benefit to them.

The Sudanese situation is a clear example of how grassroots women can benefit by developing communication and negotiation skills. Most Sudanese women NGOs, for example are organized by elite groups. Although they advocate peace, they make no effort to network with each other. They center their activities in either Nairobi or Kampala and have little to do with grassroots women in southern Sudan or with refugee women living in Kenya or Uganda. They are all competing against each other for limited resources.

During my visit to Uganda and, later, to Kenya, I had discussions with Sudanese refugee women regard this NGO problem. They felt that it would be an adequate solution to create a coordinating entity that would pull together the available resources, perhaps in partnerships or joint ventures, and thus connect them with the needs of the grassroots people. However, the controlling elite of the NGOs present an obstacle to change. 1) They compete against each other and that does not enhance cooperation to broaden their activities. 2) They are far away from the sites. If these activities were to reach the grassroots women, they could become the real potential agents for peaceful change in their communities. The energy to break the impasse must come from the grassroots women. Training grassroots women to communicate and negotiate effectively must become a priority if the grassroots people of Sudan are ever going to break the cycle of violence. Communication and negotiation skills are the tools they need to work within the social system in order to improve it.

The situation in Sudan underscores why the Kigali Declaration's proposed program of training in communication and negotiation skills for women should be designed specifically to benefit grassroots women. The coalition building among women in Africa and around the world also drives home the necessity for training women, especially the grassroots and rural women. This training should be considered by women as a first step toward building their capacity as leaders of civil society in Africa, at both micro and macro levels.

Using the Media to Promote Peace Building

Although outsiders sometimes view Africa as "backward," mass communication through newspapers, radio, and television is very much a part of African life. The mass media can be used to stir up conflict that individuals exploit for their own benefit, or it can also be used to communicate values for resolving conflict. Several workshops at the Kigali conference involved the participants in activities designed to explore the ways and means of promoting peace building on a mass scale.

Conference participants viewed videotapes from a Search for Common Ground (Maimouna Mills of VOA) to learn what can be done with simple, relatively cheap studio formats. The power of the video images and story telling was demonstrated by the heated discussion generated among the conference participants as they watched videos of African women describing how conflict had destroyed their communities. The participants seemed to understand the diversity and complexity of these violent conflicts, even without much background information. The questions they raised in the discussion reflected the action-orientation of the conference. For example, women asked, "How can we revisit the criteria for representation on peace negotiation teams so that the women and the other stakeholders who are bearing the brunt of conflict can be seated at the negotiating tables?" They also shared: "How can we stop arms production in the developed world and elsewhere from supplying the African markets?" And in the case of Sudan, I asked: "What can the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development Partners Forum do to redirect resources to make IGAD a more effective and more inclusive forum, to provide a fuller participation of the civil society?" Through viewing and discussing these simple videotapes, the women grasped the potential of images to inspire the thought process.

Conference participants also learned how to prepare action plans for a televised "Town Meeting." They then participated in an actual televised Town Meeting called, "Face to Face: Women spoke out on the Lusaka Peace Accords." Participants put their plan into action through questioning a panel composed of several UN personnel and an advisor to the Rwanda Peace Accords. Maimouna Mill of Voice of America and Sam Nkusi, General Director of Rwandatel moderated the meeting. The televised discussion also touched on the general situation in Africa and specific situations in the Great Lakes, the Horn of Africa, West Africa, and Sierra Leone.

Because of the practical, hands-on activities, participants became aware that the conference itself served as a public forum, a vehicle for mass communication. The conference was not just an academic exercise, but rather an audible challenge to the leadership of African nations and the international community to alleviate the suffering of women and children in the midst of violent conflict. The voice of the conference also spoke to the NGO community. While the participants acknowledged the external efforts to aid African women and children, they suggested that the African interest in peace and stability be recognized as a priority for further development.

The conference succeeded in communicating to African and NGO leadership, as well as to the public in the region, that women must not be excluded from the decision-making processes that shape their lives and their communities. The message was clear: women are ready to take action to build lasting peace in the whole African continent.

Building Coalitions: Women in Action

In a sense, the work accomplished at the Kigali conference was easy compared to what now remains to be done. If women are to become effective partners for peace, they must build strong coalitions among grassroots women in The Horn, the Great Lakes, and other areas of conflict around Africa.

On a broad level, the Kigali conference initiated coalition building by presenting the Kigali Declaration 2000 to African Heads of State attending the July 2000 Organization of African Unity OAU meeting. "Women as Partners for Peace" supports the endorsement of the Declaration by African Heads of State because it demonstrates a commitment to peace in Africa, particularly on the part of African leadership. Special language was included in the Declaration to allow individual African states to ratify the instrument. We will encourage African leaders to push for ratification and to implement the Declaration. Implementation can be accomplished with little or no changes in the present African systems of government. Those governments that implement the Declaration, in effect, become the capstone of a coalition formed from the grassroots upward that has the power to institutionalize the peace and social stability that must precede and secure economic development in Africa.

Participants from the Horn and the Great Lakes formed regional coalitions and identified specific goals, which if they are to be fulfilled, will require a commitment of resources, time, and effort on the part of each member. I joined with the other woman from Sudan who attended the conference in building a regional coalition. Regina M. Loki, member of Sudanese Women Voice for Peace, and we had lengthy discussions with the women from the Eritrean, Ethiopian, Ugandan, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwandan delegations. The addendum is the result of our discussion and represents the beginning of a network that we hope will result in opportunities for leadership training and more exposure for the Sudanese and other women who have been isolated by conflict. Unfortunately, the greatest obstacle to our achieving the aims of the coalition is a lack of resources. This was the most common reservation among the women forming goals for their coalition.

As direct result of the conference, coalition building resulted in action in Uganda. Three Rwandan participants accompanied Rwanda's President H. E. Paul Kagame on a visit to Uganda to join ongoing peace negotiations between Rwanda and Uganda.

As a representative of Sudan, I was invited to visit Uganda by the Honorable Zoe Bakako, Member of the Ugandan Parliament, Arua District. I was impressed by the concern this gracious African woman showed for the people of her district in arranging for me to visit Sudanese refugees in northern Uganda. This was a dangerous journey that

I could not have made without Zoe's help. In Kampala, Zoe and I met with women groups, high-level government officials, and members of parliament. I was given complete freedom to speak to the needs of Sudan's grassroots people, who are victims of the brutality and political cunning of rebel groups from northern Uganda and southern Sudan. Zoe and I drew an action plan that includes Zoe meeting regularly with the Sudanese women groups in Uganda. We hope that this plan will enable the local Ugandan and refugee Sudanese women to work together for positive, tangible results. Our Uganda/Sudan coalition is patterned after the process that began with the Kigali conference. We will report on progress made by the women in northern Uganda during the next few months, review the commitments we made at the Kigali conference, and encourage women groups in similar areas of conflict to reinforce our efforts.

Evaluation and Recommendations

Comments about the total conference experience were, for the most part, positive. As it turned out, participants were ready to move into the action planning phase earlier in the process than the planners had expected. It came as no surprise, then, that participants rated the conference action planning process very highly.

However, the evaluation process highlighted two key problems. First, many of the African participants felt that activities were geared too heavily toward North/South interaction. In planning future conferences, small group discussion leaders and facilitators will need to be more involved in the content planning process and more knowledgeable about the conflict areas.

Second, the African participants felt that during interactive activities, the women from the Western World "stole the show." Future conference planners must be more careful to anticipate and accommodate the cultural sensitivities of the participants. At Kigali, the culture of Western dominance came through in the behavior of the Western women, but also, through a careless decision on the part of the conference planners, took on a visual symbol. This was the lone display of the American flag in the front of the conference hall. None of the African flags were displayed, not even that of the host country Rwanda. As the days went by, the American banner came to signify the feeling among many of the African participants that the conference was primarily an experience for a Western audience, and that the African presence was superfluous.

During the conference, some of the participants proposed that the Women as Partners for Peace headquarters should be in Uganda. I support the idea because Uganda is in the geographic center of the countries that are in conflict. Uganda is close enough to allow easy access to the grassroots women from the Horn and the Great Lakes.

Looking Towards the Future

Conference participants planned for effective follow-up to the Kigali Declaration 2000, both on the individual and conference levels. The conference participants organized themselves in order to help each other and, especially, to include the refugee women

living in their regions. Each member of a task group, coalition, or network will be held accountable for doing what she has said she will do. Contact persons at Women as Partners for Peace desk will coordinate accountability by:

1. Determining whether or not the women groups are meeting and to encourage those who are not meeting to begin working.
2. Providing whatever assistance the women groups need in order to accomplish their goals. This might include information about resources or the progress of related task groups, written materials, and moral support.
3. Helping women groups narrow or refine their focus, if necessary.
4. Suggesting that women groups working on similar projects meet jointly.
5. Keeping a complete written record of each group's progress.

On the conference level, individuals have made themselves accountable to:

1. Implement the Kigali Declaration 2000 and other initiatives that are taking place in the Horn of Africa.
2. Launch a book on the Women as Partners for Peace Kigali Conference. (I was asked to contribute a chapter.)
3. Present the Kigali Declaration 2000 to the OAU and the UN Security Council.
4. Organize exchange programs within the Horn and the Great Lake Region involving women from the grassroots. Exchange visits will include Angola, Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Somalia, Sierra Leone, and other countries.
5. Visit the UN to ask the Security Council why the Sudan crisis has not received the same attention as other cases of the national liberation, such as Kosovo. Fund raising to sponsor a group of women from the Horn and the Great Lakes Regions to travel to New York is ongoing. Already I have created a basket to be presented to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and the chair of the UN Security Council. I have pledged to personally see this action through to completion.

Organize the second Women as Partners for Peace conference, proposed date is December 6, 2000, in Harare Zimbabwe.

Acknowledgment

I want to express my gratitude to the Women Commission for Refugee Women and Children, who made it possible for me to attend the conference. I also extend my

gratitude to the US Department of State for organizing the conference in collaboration with UNDP, UNHCR, UNICTR, UNIFEM, the World Bank, and USAID.

I appeal to the Women Commission to continue to support me in this endeavour.

Addendum

Rwanda, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan Coalition - Kigali 2000

We, the women of Rwanda, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan, attending the Women as Partners for Peace Conference in Kigali, Rwanda from June 25-30, 2000, believing that war destroys and peace builds, aware of the suffering of our populations, especially women and children, caused by the continuous armed conflicts in our region, understanding the diversity of the conflict, demand that:

1. Immediate ceasefire and consequent processes to expedite the resolve of hostilities as per Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement be implemented by our governments.
2. That through our common voice we be allowed to meet our heads of government and facilitators who participate in peace negotiations in order to table our agenda and discuss the Kigali Declaration 2000.
3. Full participation at the negotiation process at different levels in our region.
4. Exchange of information and experiences through cross-cultural exchange programs.
5. We seek support for linkages at regional and international levels to facilitate the coalition to implement our peace agenda.

Finally, we acknowledge the efforts of all the participants and organisations who supported the Women as Partners for Peace Conference which enabled us to form this coalition.