



FOUNDERS:

Betty Williams, Ireland - 1976
Máiread Maguire, Ireland - 1976
Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Guatemala - 1992
Prof. Jody Williams, USA - 1997
Dr. Shirin Ebadi, Iran - 2003
Prof. Wangari Maathai, Kenya - 2004

united for peace with justice and equality

Wednesday, May 13, 2009

'REAL' DEMOCRACY GUARANTEES EQUAL RIGHTS, SECURITY & PEACE *Nobel Peace Laureates Call for Global End to War on Women*

(Antigua, Guatemala). Democracies around the globe—already threatened by the financial crisis and militarized conflicts—will be further weakened unless women's rights are guaranteed. This, according to a gathering of over 100 international women's activists, journalists and policy-makers—led by Nobel Peace Laureates Rigoberta Menchu Tum (Guatemala), Jody Williams (USA), Shirin Ebadi (Iran) and Mairead Maguire (Ireland)—at the conclusion of a three-day meeting to strategize about how women can reshape democracy to be more responsive to women.

"Democracy does not stop with the vote," said Rigoberta Menchu Tum, who hosted the meeting. "Governments must be held accountable for protecting the rights of women everywhere—in both public and private spheres. Democracy must respect human rights—civil, political, social and economic rights—not just majority rule."

Over 720 women were murdered last year in Guatemala alone, according to official Guatemalan government figures. That same year, of the more than 39,000 cases of reported domestic violence, 95% of the cases were women. Since 2001, more than 1,500 women have been murdered—of which only 14 cases have been tried and perpetrators brought to justice.

The four Nobel Laureates joined the conference participants in calling for an end to all state violence against women, and the end to the harassment of human rights defenders. They also called for the protection of women and children in war and other conflict situations, including in Gaza, Darfur, and Burma.

Activists from Burma raised concerns over the upcoming elections in Burma, scheduled for May 2010. Burma's democratically elected opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, is barred from running in the elections—and women are limited in their access to public

offices and kept from running for president. Widespread violence against women, including the use of rape as a tactic of civil war, is ongoing in Burma.

“The war on women must come to an end. Women’s rights are often the first thing ‘traded in’ for the sake of greater national security or even in the name of ‘democracy,’” said Jody Williams. “But true democracy will be achieved when everyone’s rights are put front and centre—starting with half the human population: women. As women, we should never allow ourselves to be put last.”

A representative of UNIFEM noted that worldwide, only 2.4% of signatories to the major peace agreements signed since 1996 are women, and women have made up less than 6% of the negotiating delegations in peace negotiations aimed at bringing conflicts to an end. In fact, only five peace talks in history have brought the issue of sexual violence to the table. UNIFEM has also documented that violence targeted against women in public decision making roles is on the rise.

“We give governments the power to use violence,” said Mairead Maguire. “As women, we have to have the courage to speak truth to power and say this violence is not OK. This violence must come to an end.”

The women at the conference agreed that violence against women limits their participation in democracy—and lack of legal parity in national laws as well as the failure to adopt or conform with international laws is a big part of the problem.

“In Iran, the laws discriminate against women and the life of a woman is worth half of a man,” said Shirin Ebadi. “For example, if a man and woman both have car accidents—the insurance company will pay the woman half as much as it would the man. The government also regularly harasses women human rights defenders.”

Two Iranian human rights defenders invited to the conference were not allowed to leave Iran. In the past two years, Ebadi, a lawyer, has defended 50 women who were unjustly jailed or detained by Iranian authorities.

There are some examples of places in the world where women are making progress, especially in electoral processes. These include:

- Twenty-four countries now boast national assemblies that are 30% or more female. (Source: UNIFEM.)
- South Africa is now 4th in the world for representation of women in politics, with 43% of parliamentarians being women. Rwanda ranks 1st; 56% of seats are held by women. Sweden and Cuba rank 2nd and 3rd, with 47% and 43.2% respectively. (Source: UNIFEM.)

The conference was organized by the Nobel Women’s Initiative, in close collaboration with JASS (Just Associates), an international network working in Mesoamerica, Africa and Southeast Asia to strengthen women’s activist leadership and organizing power. The local host partner is the Rigoberta Menchu Tum Foundation (FRMT), which promotes the rights of indigenous people around the world.

Women attending the meeting came from around the globe, and included representatives from Sudan, Guatemala, Honduras, the US, Norway, India, Israel, Palestine, Iran, Burma, Burundi and Zimbabwe. Participants included Barbara Lawton, the Lieutenant Governor of Wisconsin (USA), Nadia Bilbassy-Charters, Bureau Chief of the Middle East Broadcast Corporation in Washington, DC, Bernadette Sayo, the Minister of Social Affairs and the Family from the Central African Republic, Eva Mappy Morgan, the Deputy Minister of Justice for Public Safety and Administration, Ministry of Justice in Liberia, and Teresa Columba Ulloa Ziiariz, the regional Director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women and Girls for Latin America and the Caribbean.

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