

*Women of Faith Leadership Summit, “Restoring Dignity”
on the occasion of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.
Religions for Peace, March 1, 2010, New York
Panel on Restoring the Dignity of Women and Girls,
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This remarkable session focused on a vitally important topic, and I heartily welcome the initiative that Religion for Peace has taken to bring us together. My charge is to summarize briefly the session’s highlights, with a focus on paths ahead and ideas for action that emerge.

The discussion was inspiring, informative, and deeply sobering. It focused especially on stories, highlighting that every one of us is engaged with the fact of violence against women and girls, either through personal experience or through the experiences of people we know, in our families and communities. It is tempting to recount more stories, and indeed more than one personal experience comes to mind in reflecting on the messages each speaker sought to convey today. That the intensely personal dimension of the experience, its wide reach and devastating impact, and our shared deep conviction that violence against women and others is absolutely unacceptable in light of the true teachings of all faiths, are what I see as today’s central conclusions. The theme of accountability ran through the discussion as a spiritual and a practical call: calling communities and individuals to account to bring violence to an end. Each speaker highlighted that women from different religious traditions bring knowledge, wisdom, and a call to action to the table. If we do not act, who will?

I, like many others, came to this discussion with a puzzle in my mind. I found my perplexity echoed in the presentations and the exchange with participants that followed. Given what we know, and the obvious moral outrage that violence represents, why is there not more energy and more passion in trying to end domestic violence and the abuse of women and children? The conclusions that emerge, both explicitly and implicitly, are threefold. First, women will have to lead the effort to bring about real change. Second, we must work harder to put the facts on the table and dispel the array of misunderstandings and myths that dampen fervor to act. And third, we need to point the way to actions that are successful if we are to work for real results. Certain kinds of action were described, especially humanizing care within communities: examples were given of shelters and programs that help survivors and shame the perpetrators, calling them to account. Actions that successfully change community norms, important to prevent violence and make it unacceptable, are harder to identify.

But Marie Fortune stated the ideal in crystal clear terms: that our grandchildren and great grandchildren will hear of an era where violence was quite common with disbelief because, in the world that they will know, such violence is unknown or at least a rare aberration.

The discussion focused both on the issues of knowledge about violence – what we know and what we do not - and on its ethical dimensions. In particular, it dealt with what religious traditions bring to our understanding of violence. Above all, we focused on what forms of action would be most effective in bringing this problem to an end.

In terms of knowledge, the panel discussion highlighted five areas of powerful tools and witness that are a foundation for bringing change.

The first part of knowledge is a personal recognition and understanding. The meeting was full of compassion and outrage, reflecting an appreciation that violence and cruelty represent an underside of humanity that causes great pain and lasting damage. From compassion and anger arises a real sense of collective responsibility. There were questions about trends, and whether things getting better or worse? Some see increases in violence as a product of the disruptions of modernization and breakdowns in traditional norms which, especially in some smaller communities, frowned upon its use. One real obstacle to action is a sotto voce chorus of disbelief among communities and policy leaders that domestic violence really exists at any significant scale. However, today there are books, films, videos, and personal witness that make clear the realities of the types of violence that occur, and the pain and courage of those who are at its receiving end. These stories can represent a major fount of wisdom and inspiration.

A second part of knowledge is our understanding, at a global, quantifiable level of the incidence of violence against women and girls. This is linked to a core feature of the problem at issue: that it is so often cloaked in secrecy, shame, and stigma. By its nature, domestic violence is not easily measured or quantified, because it so often happens in a private space. Even so, we know significantly more today about its incidence than we did 10-15 years ago. Our knowledge broadens the important portrait that emerges from stories and lived experience. The introductory presentations in particular highlighted the raw statistics that document patterns of violence against women and girls. Studies by the WHO, and others, have highlighted that it is a problem that cuts across all cultures and across all ages. It is a phenomenon that has been shrouded by stigma which has distorted knowledge and understanding. Today, there is little excuse for not lifting the shroud. For example, the fact (graphically portrayed by one commentator) that, at any given moment someone is experiencing violence, and that, annually, some 5,000 women are murdered by family members, drives home the important point that a problem that was once hidden is now much more in the open.

In sum, a wide range of studies document that violence against women is widespread, even if little talked about (perhaps half of all women who experience violence never speak of it to a living soul). It is not determined by the level of education; indeed, it is present among the most educated as well as those who have not had educational opportunities. As one example, the World Bank, where I worked for many years, has had to face the reality that it has among its staff both perpetrators and survivors. This is true of virtually all institutions today, including a number of United Nations institutions as well as churches and other religious communities that are slowly coming to terms with these realities.

Also highlighted were the extraordinary and horrifying stories of types of violence against women that are systematically practiced as a weapon of war. The Balkans and the Democratic Republic of the Congo were cited as particularly horrifying examples of a phenomenon that, however outrageous and incredible it may seem, is widespread. Even peacekeeping forces are involved as perpetrators, to the horror of those who acknowledged that reality.

A third piece of knowledge that we have is the vital, very tangible and important role that changing the role of women to one of true equality plays in successful development. The benefits of educating girls, of women's economic empowerment, and of engaging women politically within their communities, have been demonstrated by research in many different ways. Ending violence is both a prerequisite and a potential result of societies where women are respected and have opportunities to choose and to develop their potential.

A fourth area where knowledge is important is in tracking and responding to the fact that, during periods of economic crisis, violence increases, especially though not exclusively within households (crime also increases at such times). Here, we have very little concrete data to show exactly what happens, and what the level is, which makes it much more difficult to act. However, many reports, albeit fragmentary of reports, as well as anecdotes, attest to a pattern of increase in domestic violence during times of economic difficulty. This was, for example, a common theme during a consultation focused on Latin America that the WFDD organized with faith-inspired leaders in January 2009. All of the participants reported horror stories of increases in abuse in homes across the region, as people lost jobs, turned to alcohol, and suffered blows to their self-esteem. While we have the knowledge to move the case forward, we need to focus on improving data so that we are armed with better tools to act. Fifth and finally, the presenters stressed repeatedly that the core messages from their sacred texts, while they have ambiguities, also have clarion messages that underscore human dignity and equality. Sacred texts, even as they have been used in the past as justification for violence, can serve as a source of inspiration for solutions in the future.

In short, we today have a wealth of knowledge about violence against women and girls, and know far more about the extent of the problem than we have in the past. There is thus much less basis than there might have previously been for denial or brushing violence aside as out of the norm. Nonetheless, there is still much that we do not know, and more and better analysis is essential to moving forward.

Even with this improved knowledge, the presentations touched on the nagging problem of doubts and hesitations. They are part of unraveling the puzzling mystery of why the issue of violence against women is so rarely accorded the priority it deserves. Why is there not an upwelling of indignation within communities? One factor is the common myth that violence may happen elsewhere, but that "this doesn't happen in our community." Unspoken acceptance of norms of violence is regrettably quite widespread (for example, a common assertion is that women invite violence, or that women are violent in words while men are violent action). A step forward involves recognizing the underlying reasons for denial and hesitation, where some find foundations for ambiguity in judgment. The purpose for this probing is not to justify or defend but to confront and change.

Among the doubts, I would highlight three that I have personally heard over the years and that had some echo here. The first is the disbelief that the problem of violence is, in fact, as widespread as the statistics and stories suggest. This can be confronted with a highlight on the powerful reports that exist, and even more by utilizing the power of storytelling. The second is the difficulty that many have in believing that such anger and evil can exist in people they know. From my experience, I call to mind a meeting involving two colleagues of my age, who had

similar education and professional experience. One had been accused of harassment by a number of women. The other, like myself, was responsible for deciding what action needed to be taken. Hearing the man's story, my colleague was ready to dismiss the women's accusations, because he simply could not believe that the colleague had acted as reported. Finally, there is a tendency to romanticize the ideals of religions and communities. This makes it especially hard for many to accept and then address reports of violence within a religious community, whether it is the leaders or community members. We also tend to romanticize the past, though there is much evidence that violence and abuse of strength and power have deep roots in history.

The issue of stigma associated with violence, stigma against the victims, was mentioned by several in the discussion. There is too often a shame that accompanies reporting and discussing violence. This explains the common tendency to hide violent acts. A surprising and thought-provoking recent survey suggests that women, more than men, tend to blame the victim, or claim that victims are partly to blame for what happens. There is clearly a long path to travel in changing attitudes. This is an area where the group identified responsibilities and opportunities for women in faith communities to act.

In conclusion, we need to focus on questions of what to do. Are there models that show what can work? What can help faith leaders and faith communities play more specific and active roles in providing support to women? How can we act to change the rules of the game?

The question, which the panel addressed, of how to bring about change, was full of imperatives and inspiration. It was less full of tangible and specific routes to change. The ideal of a violence-free community is clear, but the path to it is far less so.

One path on which the group focused was through partnership. It is important, for example, to have real partnership between men and women in confronting violence. It is also telling that we need to look for different models of partnership. A personal story of mine illustrates how common assumptions about the nature of partnership can contribute to perpetuating unequal relationships, a contributing factor in violence and abuse. Some years ago, I was criticized for pursuing a management arrangement wherein two people shared a responsibility, because the prevailing norm was that results could be achieved only when one person was in charge. The ideal of sharing responsibility within a partnership of equals was quite alien, though in my experience it was both feasible and beneficial. The acceptance of a model of dominance can be part of the problem, if it is assumed to apply to all relationships.

As we look to the future, we need to distinguish between ideals, including the teachings of our faiths, and the actual reality of what happens in communities and families. The ideal is the way societies think they should be; it is also often the way they truly believe that things work. Actual realities, revealed by evidence and probing of realities, may be very different. Understanding and acting on violence against women and girls calls, more than virtually any other issue, for an understanding of the light and the dark side of human behavior. As several of the panelists insisted, in order to make violence unacceptable to all, it must be named, recognized, scrutinized, and shamed.

Some of the leading action ideas focused on the importance of personal witness, caring, and challenging the silence. We need to find and amplify powerful voices and bring out the sense of outrage about what happens in reality. We need to dig and we need to make clear again and again that violence is an unacceptable violation of human rights, of our cherished value of human dignity, and of the core teachings of our faiths.

More positively, we need to promote models of equality and partnership that are based on dignity. Many spoke about programs to heal, and the healing power of sharing and of stories. But, even more, our goal is to find and to build models that prevent, making violence untinkable and thus rare.

As in the early days, when women's voices emerged in political circles and the developing world, the leadership of women themselves is important. We cannot simply wait for things to happen, or for people to wake up. The puzzle of the silence, and the puzzle of the discomfort that so many within faith communities and elsewhere have in talking about domestic violence, calls on those who know – those who can sympathize, and particularly women who are leaders and members of faith communities – to act. That is why this meeting has such importance.