

Moved to Tears, Moved to Action

By Jacqueline Ogega

Women in labor walking for miles to find a clinic ... women giving birth by the roadside ... women leaking urine 24 hours a day because of fistula, the result of maternal injuries, sexual violence, or both ... pregnant women bedridden with HIV/AIDS infections ... pregnant women with no access to pre-natal and ante-natal care ... girls raped and forcefully impregnated.

These grotesque images of human suffering come from real life: they are testimonies of cases of maternal trauma and fistula made by women from Virika, Uganda, and Mwanza, Tanzania, both rural poor settings, during a recent consultation sponsored by Religions for Peace, in collaboration with the United Nations Foundation. Meeting in New York City, the consultation was one in a series of initiatives to stir action against maternal deaths and fistula.

As people of faith, are we outraged enough about women's suffering to take action? Are we alarmed enough by the inhumane conditions and vulnerabilities that so many women face, and the need for proper care for giving life? To be sure, the conference participants who heard the testimonies from Tanzania and Uganda that day were moved to tears, with cries of "What can we do to help?" Someone donated a Flip camera to Holy Family Virika Hospital in Uganda to capture the stories of women. Women of faith from Long Island City, N.Y. – mobilizing from churches, temples, mosques, and gurdwaras – raised \$2,600 within weeks for medical needs. Other spontaneous responses flowed forth.

A Track Record of Crisis-Response

I am always astonished and inspired at how quickly women of faith organize for action. My current work at Religions for Peace focuses on building such women-of-faith networks, whether in small villages or across nations. The Religions for Peace Global

Women of Faith Network has helped network more than 1,000 religious women's organizations internationally for more than ten years and witnessed their leadership in resolving conflict.

The goal of the networks is to mobilize women of faith around issues of peace. And I mean peace in the broadest terms: not just the absence of war, but living honorably, dying in peace, and not starving. The networks endeavor to reduce hunger and to prevent women from dying during pregnancy or child-birth. They protect children's well-being. They sponsor training, counseling, and informal microcredit initiatives. They provide support for HIV/AIDS orphans and vulnerable children. They do home-based care for the chronically ill.

Sadly, though, the work of women of faith is customarily ignored. Politically they are often invisible. Financially they are unsupported or under-supported. They are dismissed as "informal prayer" networks and groups. In many cases they raise their own funds, since it is difficult to access official funding and resources. Yet their work is critical. They take on pivotal tasks far beyond care-giving gendered roles – fundraising, political civic engagement, even courageous peacemaking in dangerous situations of intractable conflicts.

In April 1997, at the brutal height of the civil war in Sierra Leone that had lasted two decades, women of faith played a critical role in mediating peace. Villages were ravaged, child soldiers were recruited

openly for war, and civilians were casually mutilated or murdered by warring parties. Women met with fighters from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and successfully convinced rebel leaders to release fifty child soldiers. These women, members of the Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone (IRC SL), an affiliate of Religions for Peace, put their country first, standing up for peace.

Let us applaud these achievements. At the same time, I have come to value the need to remain terribly troubled. In the twenty-first century, why do we still tolerate woeful conditions that allow a woman

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to die while giving life? How can we bear it that a mere adolescent child, already a mother, is rotting away with fistula and vaginal injury? The harsh truth is, maternal health is not yet everyone's business. Sadly, maternal health is considered "women's business" only, and not a peace-and-security imperative. The resources – human, material, financial – are not dedicated to make sure that every woman gives birth in safety, or that every woman and girl is free from violence, or that every child is born safely and raised in a secure environment. Instead, habitual war expenditure ensures the spread of lethal armies and technologies that maim and destroy.

We face a persistent mental habit and political prejudice: the world too often looks at women as victims of conflict rather than as agents of conflict resolution. Women are generally undervalued in peacemaking, or not valued at all. They are marginalized or excluded from the political process. They could shed light on policies involving peacemaking work they are already doing, but there is a lack of confidence to join or engage. Confidence must be built. Their space must be claimed.

Prayers of Ultimate Peace

Cannot the religious voice grow louder in defense of maternal health and the role of women in peacemaking? Cannot the religious voice advocate a re-direction of war budgets to the nurturing of life? Cannot faith-based actions rally around the promise of dignity and well-being of women and children, as warranted in religious teachings? Faith communities cannot leave modern threats to peace, including maternal health, mostly in the hands only of women

who are survivors themselves or serve as politically marginalized social workers, nurses, volunteers, counsellors, or caregivers of the afflicted.

Alas, there are no quick solutions to these problems rooted in gender inequality. Women of faith cannot afford to remain apolitical or do the work by themselves. They must forge partnerships with governments, civil society, academic institutions, and with individuals dedicated to equality and human rights. Gender lenses have to be applied to overcome this "invisibility."

Our faith must stir us to go where the suffering is happening. All people of faith – men, women, youth – must become much more deeply troubled about the causes of gender discrimination and impoverishment embedded in systems, structures, and processes. In faith, we can work to transform inequality. We can alter political decisions about how to spend foreign and domestic budgets. We can empower survivors to make known their own solutions. We can raise the faith-based voices, break the silences, and reject any misuses of religion that justify such human suffering.

May the truth move us to tears and, more deeply, mobilize us to take action and embody the vision common to all the religions – the prayer of ultimate peace, where people endeavor to live in harmony, and the well-being of each person is related to the well-being of all.¹

Jacqueline Moturi Ogega is Director of the Women's Program at the World Conference of Religions for Peace-International, based in New York City. Previously, she served as the African Women's Project Director at Religions for Peace in Africa, where she established the African Women of Faith Network to enhance multi-religious cooperation for action in Africa. Born in Kenya, she has been a lecturer in Gender and Development Studies at the University of Nairobi and National Coordinator of the Gender and Development Program of Caritas in Kenya.

NOTES

- 1 Religions for Peace expounds notions of peace and the leadership of women of faith in various publications, including: *Faith Endures: Eliminating Fistula, Securing Maternal Health; A Guide for Building Women of Faith Networks; Restoring Dignity: A Toolkit for Religious Communities to End Violence Against Women; Strategic Plan: Different Faiths, Common Action*; and *A Woman's Place: Religious Women as Public Actors*. See www.religionsforpeace.org.