

UPF-Europe and Middle East: Geneva Conference Can We Really End Wars?

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Geneva, Switzerland – A conference at the United Nations Office in Geneva on the theme “No more wars, can we? / No peace without women” on May 10, 2024, drew an international audience of about 200. The conference was organized jointly by the Europe-Middle East branches of UPF and Women’s Federation for World Peace International (WFWPI).

The affiliated organization International Association of Youth and Students for Peace (IAYSP) was also a sponsor, as were the World Council of Churches (WCC), UN Women, Soroptimist International, Latter-day Saint (LDS) Charities, Fribourg Peace Forum, Geneva Interfaith Intercultural Alliance (GIIA), and NGO Committee on the Status of Women (NGO CSW), Geneva.



Welcome and opening remarks by the organizers

In his welcoming remarks, **Mr. Jacques Marion**, chairman of UPF-Europe and the Middle East, underscored the urgency for peace amid ongoing conflicts. Mr. Marion emphasized the role of religious leaders in seeking peace, reminding the audience of the proposition by the UPF founders in 2000, that the United Nations create an Interreligious Council to work alongside political leaders in resolving conflicts.

Ms. Carolyn Handschin, president of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women in Geneva, reflected on the women's peace movement post-WWI, epitomized by the rallying cry "No more war." Following the outbreak of the Ukraine war, organizations like WFWPI and IAFLP advocated "No Peace without Women." Major events on this theme yielded enthusiastic responses and practical outcomes.



Session 1: A faith-based approach to lasting peace through reconciliation

Ms. Karen Bybee, representative of LDS Charities to the UN Office, Geneva, ably chaired the session.

Rev. Dr. Jerry Pillay, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, addressed the inclination of political leaders toward aggression rather than seeking peaceful dialogue, citing conflicts in Ukraine, Russia, and Israel-Palestine. He noted these conflicts often arise from factors other than religious differences. The WCC emphasizes peace from a faith perspective, believing individuals should be agents of peace, justice, and stability.

Rev. Pillay proposed five strategies for lasting peace: challenging structures that incite war; advocating for justice in economic, gender, climate, and digital realms; promoting healing and reconciliation; adopting an integrated approach to global challenges; and fostering collaboration across diverse groups, including NGOs and various faiths.

Mr. Heiner Handschin, coordinator of the International Association for Peace and Development (IAPD) in Europe and the Middle East, emphasized the necessity of action in times of violence, quoting the late US President John F. Kennedy to underscore the importance of good people taking decisive steps against evil. He highlighted the vital role religious leaders play in guiding their communities and addressing global injustices. Mr. Handschin advocated for a more inclusive peace strategy involving religious leaders. He also connected peacebuilding to familial roles, paralleling parenting with conflict resolution.

Ms. Srruthi Lekha Raaja Elango, deputy director of the WFWP Office for UN Relations in Geneva, emphasized that differing standards of peace fuel conflicts. She shared a personal experience from Germany, where "Ruhezeiten" laws ensure quiet nights and Sundays. As an Indian immigrant, she found adapting to these standards challenging, highlighting cultural differences. This contrasts sharply with regions in conflict, where grave violations like bombings are common. She criticized the inconsistency in global peace standards and the failure of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. True peace requires equal standards, without hypocrisy or double standards, and treating others as we wish to be treated.

Session 2: "No Peace without Women"

As **Ms. Tatiana Molcean**, under-secretary-general and executive secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), was unable to be present, her speech was presented by **Ms. Hillary Murphy**, the UNECE senior social affairs officer. Ms. Molcean stressed three areas of concern in the European region: working for gender equality, countering a growing movement that opposes gender equality, and remedying the disproportionate impact of war on women.

Ms. Adriana Quiñones, head of human rights and development for UN Women, expressed concern over escalating armed conflicts in Yemen, Gaza, and Ukraine, which disproportionately affect women and girls. Quiñones emphasized that women are often marginalized in peace processes, and asserted that women's inclusion leads to more comprehensive, enduring peace. UN Women supports initiatives such as training prosecutors in Guatemala to combat wartime sexual violence, and involving women's organizations in Colombian peace talks.



Dr. Svjetlana Jovic, a conflict prevention expert with UNIFIL, highlighted that despite the UN Security Council's adoption of Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security 24 years ago, women's voices remain overlooked in peace processes. Since 2018 in South Lebanon, over two dozen women have been trained in mediation and conflict prevention, convincing local leaders of the benefits. These women are now active in helping displaced families and resolving local disputes, using their mediation skills. Dr. Jovic emphasized that empowering women in peace efforts is crucial, stating that any effort in planting a seed of peace is worthwhile.

Ms. Carolyn Handschin emphasized the need to mobilize to end wars through dialogue and cooperation. She highlighted women's crucial roles during and after wars, such as running businesses, holding communities together, and caring for the injured. Despite the opportunities presented by UN Security Council Resolution 1325, she argued that women still need to be fully integrated at all stages of conflict, especially pre-conflict. She underscored the significant influence women have as nurturers and influencers.

Ms. An Monita, vice president of IAYSP-Cambodia, highlighted the organization's mission to inspire collaboration for true peace. She emphasized three points: the absence of women from peace talks weakens sustainability; UN Security Council Resolution 1325 is crucial for recognizing women's roles; and peace begins in families nurtured by mothers' love. She praised Cambodian women for taking leadership roles in economic development, community healing, and justice advocacy. Ms. Monita stressed the potential of young women to drive positive change, stating their voices are vital for inclusive policies, social cohesion, and addressing the roots of conflict.