

Interview with Motoko Sugiyama Vice President and Director of WFWP UN Office

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Women's Federation for World Peace International



The following is an interview with Mrs. Motoko Sugiyama, Vice President and Director of UN Office on August 24th, 2012. This interview uncovers the three main ways that WFWP contributes to the work and global mission of the United Nations. Also, as Mrs. Sugiyama explains her aspirations for WFWP in the coming decade, she points out the critical area of work that she sees WFWP's leaders will need to focus on so that WFWP can build on its notable accomplishments to become an even more influential international organization.

Interviewer: Much of what WFWP is, grew out of the efforts of many, but especially of the Japanese WFWP's Overseas Service Projects. So as we celebrate the first 20 years of WFWP, it is good to understand and celebrate some of the vision and focus that guided the early growth and development of WFWP Japan.

Mrs. Sugiyama, what inspired and motivated you, what did you envision for WFWP as you took up the responsibility as WFWP Japan's President in its early days?

Sugiyama: When founders -- Rev. and Mrs. Moon -- inaugurated WFWP and asked me to be the president of WFWP Japan, my main desire was to make very good women's organization in Japan. Now the larger movement already had educational and advocacy components, but what I felt could contribute the most to help show the substance of the Principles that guided members was a service organization.

In Asia there was a fore-runner organization which was called the Women's Federation for Peace in Asia. That had started in Japan six years prior. Based on my experiences with that I engaged in when I went to the Middle East to help prepare for Mrs. Moon's inaugural speech there first and as well as the following trip of "fact-finding" including North African countries by myself, I could see the importance and potential of developing a solid, strong, social Women's organization in Japan.

Interviewer: Where in the Middle East were you in particular?

Sugiyama: I went to Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Cyprus and Yemen.

Interviewer: This was in 19...

Sugiyama: Between 1993-94. When I was there I saw the huge misery resulting from civil war. And it was especially miserable for women and children. Many schools were destroyed. Women lost husbands and sons and they had no jobs. They were on the street.

So because of the spirit of that threads our Federation, I thought very much about what I could do to optimally utilize the capacity of an enormous network of women in Japan. That is how I started to think about WFWP and to organize its projects.

Then in 1994, the founders asked Japanese women to go to the 160 nations to start the WFWP chapter there. When many of these women went to "their" mission countries, they discovered the same situation as I had seen. So it was very natural for us to begin to work to address these situations.

Interviewer: So based on their commitment to "do something to help" you began to systematize the service projects and support system...

Sugiyama: Yes. Even after my trip to the Middle East and North African Countries I had started a service project. I had decided to focus on education to help children or women. Education is a powerful capacity-builder enabling people to do more with their own life -- be more self-sufficient, contribute to the future of their country, and better help themselves and their families. By focusing on education, we not only contribute to addressing current difficulties but also to the future of the country. So I already had pulled together some funds to support different schools in the area that I visited. So, you could say that I had initiated a pilot project for WFWP Japan and built on that.

Of course, for WFWP Japan as a whole, I realized we would have to make a good system. So in the Japanese headquarters, we created a Committee for Overseas Service Projects. Then through that committee we made the guidelines for developing proposals. What was important in this was that it be proposals for projects that they both wanted to do and could do, because in the end, it is they have to do the work in their mission country.

So they had to consider what they could do of course grounded in what they discovered during their first fact-finding visit to their country. Their own capacity and confidence was very important. Our approach was grassroots. And as such, in reality, the women were also building their capacity as grassroots NGO leaders. Of course we didn't have any government funding, so we had to come up with the funds too. But this we knew we could do.

So for the projects in the 160 nations, we made kind of "sisterhood relationships" within our 47 prefectures for support. Within each prefecture HQ, there were also city branches and these were the basis of the support system. Each of the 160 countries had a team of ten women. Each team had a team leader or Project Director.

WFWP Japan had other activities as well as the overseas projects, the main domestic project dealt with education and so we had a Committee on the Reconstruction of Education. That work is focused on the moral education of young people. We had many seminar and local campaigns in different prefectures dealing with pornography and promiscuity, for example. The other was a Committee to Support Foreign Women Student in Japan. That provide the scholarship for women students. Then in 1994, we started "Sisterhood Ceremonies." by the advocacy of the founders. First these were reconciliation ceremonies between Korean and Japanese women and then we focused on Sisterhood ceremonies between Japan and USA in 1995-1996, and the "Bridge of Peace" evolved out of these.

The Bridge of Peace later expanded it to France, England, most of the European countries, the Middle East and more. It has expanded all over the world eventually.

Interviewer: So Japan had quite a breadth and depth of activity. You must have been very busy!

Sugiyama: When we started sisterhood ceremony between Japan and USA we had a membership of 20,000.

Interviewer: 20,000 in Japan alone?

Sugiyama: Yes.

Interviewer: Can you explain a little more about the ceremonies themselves, and then also a little about why WFWP sought to be connected with the United Nations.

Sugiyama: Well, the Sisterhood Ceremonies /Bridge of Peace are one of our peace building efforts focused on overcoming the resentments that linger between enemies.

Women of both sides cross the bridge, symbolic of crossing over from being enemies to meet as sister who want to put the animosity behind them and build a new future together. The Bridge of Peace serves to build trust and confidence. It deals with some of the intangibles that are an important part of the peace building process.

So, peace-building, moral education and poverty eradication are three important areas of concern of WFWP. Actually, all these are inter-connected. Without peace, you cannot eradicate poverty. If you are poor, and don't have basic education, it is difficult to escape poverty. Putting it simply, I think these goals are aligned with United Nations goals.

Now I think we all do know generally that United Nations is pursuing a peaceful world and is it pretty much still the main organization that provides ways for people to get together at the global level. As we better understood how the United Nations, and ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council) in particular is interested in partnering with civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) then it just made sense for

WFWP to work together with United Nations where we could.

So by the time we applied for NGO in general consultative status with UN ECOSOC in 1997, we already had many women hard at work in many nations around the world.

Interviewer: How many countries was WFWP in at that time you applied for consultative status?

Sugiyama: Around that time, we had a WFWP presence in about 110 countries.

Interviewer: When an organization actually gets consultative status, what does that enable them to do at the international level that they could not otherwise do?

Sugiyama: The United Nations enables those with consultative status to participate in UN convened international conferences, to learn what is going on at the global level, what the hot issues are, to network with other UN affiliated NGOs, and therefore we have the opportunity to discover ways we can work together for the common good.

We are also able to sponsor conferences or meetings together with UN or with other NGOs on the UN agendas, common concerns or even on innovative approaches. All these are a significant benefit to NGOs wishing to contribute at the international level. Of course working together with United Nations also simply means that we are not alone, we are not isolated and this all helps us feel like we are part of the global family that we are striving for.

Interviewer: At the global level, what is the main thing you wish to influence?

Sugiyama: The United Nations is not borderless. Politics is all about titles, borders and status. And often these are the basis for conflict. But NGO can be borderless. What I mean by that is that NGOs can go beyond the national boundaries and focus for specific human issues regardless of political borders.

For instance, our sisterhood ceremonies show that people can go beyond the hatred and resentment and beyond national boundaries. It is not easy to for all nations to unite but it does show some hope that we can work together beyond these national and historical boundaries.

Also through the international service projects, even though they are small, they show we can support and help each other beyond our national boundaries. In other words, we can be family to one another. So we are advocates of broader issues, such as peace-building, poverty eradication and education.

Also concretely, we can make joint statement with other NGOs from many countries, and different backgrounds, and these can be presented to ECOSOC and to any of our meetings whatever. We can create one voice representing different segments of our human family beyond national boundaries.

Additionally, sometimes the Member States of the UN are not truly representative of all their people's voices. Sometimes nations insist that they don't have any problems but in fact that is not the case. NGOs can be very important for hearing and presenting the voices of those being overlooked, disregarded or abused.

I think the civil society and NGO together, we really giving the kind of advocacy or warning or whatever. Even organization cannot take to kind of initiate but because of the influence of voice by the civil society, we can move to bring as agenda, different agendas I think.

Interviewer: It seems that your approach at the UN, in terms of the influence of NGOs and civil society on the governments is often a slow indirect form of influence.

Sugiyama: Often this is so. It is important to keep a "never give up" spirit. It is like, you have a concrete wall with one small tiny hole. It might be tiny but you can keep pouring water through that hole and slowly it becomes a big hole and can even end up breaking the wall. I do think many of the efforts of NGOs at the UN are like that. Nothing comes so easily, nothing comes instantly.

Interviewer: Today we tend to be a push button society and what you have described is quite different for most people in terms of "seeing change." We tend to want it instantly. So in terms of your understanding

of the United Nations, your experience with the United Nations and WFP, what would you advise to somebody who is interested in working at the global level?

Sugiyama: I think there are several ways to go about working at the international level. You can decide to work through governments, you can decide to work with the United Nations itself as staff, or an officer, or if you have clarity about what you want to say, about what you want to see changed, then the best way is as an NGO. NGOs are more free to bring a particular message to the world. If you are working in the government or in the UN, you are expected to maintain the status quo of the organizations (the government, the UN offices) you represent.

Interviewer: You are constrained.

Sugiyama: Yes, but being a government or a UN staffer has advantages. Perhaps you cannot have a significant position right away but after some years, you can become a respected expert in those organizations. Then you can be included in the decision making part you are interested in and influence that arena.

If you are clear from the beginning about what you want to influence, then you can start as an NGO. But NGOs too have constraints. They are just different ones than governments or the UN itself.

In the end, it is really your choice. But whichever way you choose, you really have to be consistent. You shouldn't give up. You really have to become expert in your field. Then at the end, you will be very much influential person, I think that you will be satisfied what you have done at the end.

Interviewer: What one or perhaps two things do you consider significant accomplishments of WFP?

Sugiyama: I am very proud that we could continue the Forum on Eradication of Poverty. We didn't do this every year, but we have done many. And more than the forum alone, I am very proud that we were able to start so many service projects in different countries and we have continued with so many working toward the MDGs substantially with United Nations. That is my first pride.

I really have to give my thanks to the Japanese volunteers who continued until now. They are the foundation of our organization.

Interviewer: So maybe just a final wrap up, what do you see for WFP in the future? What are some of your highest hopes and your insights that indicated critical areas of concern for strengthening WFP itself?

Sugiyama: Even though we have general consultative status -- which is great -- and also we have a good relationship with the NGO branch of the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs, able to partner on many different agendas and many projects, as an organization, we are still not capable of working effectively in the higher decision making arenas. We are not really ready or in a position to be consulted by the Security Council in the same way NGOs such as Oxfam, the Red Cross, or Doctors Without Borders. My dream is that WFP would become one of them in the future. But to become trusted in that way, we have to advance more, and strengthen our service projects and our message.

Interviewer: So what specific milestones would see WFP would need to achieve for that to happen?

Sugiyama: One reality I am aware of is that the women who started projects in different countries, are aging. Their passion and commitment has accomplished amazing things. But unless we transit from this "social entrepreneurial" phase or volunteerism phase to a more professional system that younger people can engage and contribute to further development of the organization.

WFP is actually facing a critical stage of its health and development. WFP leadership does need to address this and help transition from relying on the energy and commitment of its entrepreneurial beginnings to sustainable structures or our foundation may fade away. Our leaders who see this clearly need to get together to develop a plan to address this.

This is in a way, a simply fact of the life of organizations that must be addressed, so you might call this a "pre-warning." I am not saying this to be at all discouraging, but simply to point out a decision point, a milestone that needs to be met proactively if WFP is to become a strong and successful international NGO.

Interviewer: Mrs. Sugiyama, you have been at the forefront of WFP and the worldwide projects that grew out of that amazing group of motivated, devoted and inspired Japanese women. For all that I would like to acknowledge your significant leadership and now to thank you for taking the time with me today.

Sugiyama: It was my pleasure. Thank you so much.