

## Austria's Sustainable Peace through Reconciliation and Education Conference

Elisabeth Cook, Gaby Zöhrer und Renate Amesbauer

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Conference in Vienna UN "Sustainable Peace through Reconciliation and Education"  
Vienna Int. Centre, C1, C- Building, 1220 Vienna, Wagramer Str.5



The Conference was opened by Mrs. Carolyn Handschin, WFPW International UN Office Director who welcomed warmly H. Excellency Solano Ortiz, Permanent Mission of Costa Rica who stated in his address that "Our country is being led by the capacity and wisdom of women. In times of conflict our women are more focused on finding solutions than fighting."

Also H. Excellency Ms. Lourdes Gisela Antonia Victoria-Kruse from the Permanent Mission of the Dominican Republic addressed the audience, stating that "World Peace can only be achieved with the inclusion of women." Mrs. Carolyn Handschin reported shortly about the activities of WFPW at the UN in Geneva, namely that on the 38th and 39th Human Rights Council WFPW organized two events about peace on the Korean peninsula, even sending messages to both countries. They suggested a peace zone for women on the 38th parallel! Also, representatives of the Permanent Mission of Malta and Bangladesh were present.



Session I was chaired by M. Mamadou Kone, M.E.S, Cons. Education, Health and Human Rights. The first speaker was Ms. Petra Bayr, MA MLS, Member of Parliament in Austria. Her topic was "The Roots of Genocide – Early warning mechanisms" Ms. Bayr is presently writing her theses about this topic. The question is how to prevent ethnic cleansing by being able to recognize early signs and to prevent further developments. She quoted from a book by Gregory Stanton in which he describes 10 stages of genocide, like classification of "us" and "them" by ethnicity, race or religion, discrimination and dehumanization of one group in society, up to actual persecution and extermination.

She also brought up the idea that we need a new approach to security, which means not only the military

is needed to create a safe situation, but most of all people have to be safe from hunger and other disruptions of their daily lives. The second speaker was Mr. Billy Batware, speaking on the topic "Young People as Agents of Reconciliation". Coming from Ruanda himself, he experienced the genocide which took place in his country as a result of the conflict between the Hutus and the Tutsis. His message to the young people of today is: You have the potential to make a difference! After all, 1,8 -2 billion of the world's population are young people. In order to be able to influence the world positively, the young people need protection from bullying and harassment, specially the population of young women and girls. That means we have to ensure safe spaces and proper education.



Also, the UN has invested in supporting the youth: in 2013 they nominated the first Youth Envoy, and the UN Security Council passed a resolution in support of the young people. In September of 2018 an umbrella organization for youth activities across the UN has been founded "Youth 2030". Mr. Batware noted that we will always have conflicts, but we have to learn to solve them without violence. The young people have to claim their place at the table, because at war it is them who have to fight. Ruanda today is a model for peace. Mr. Batware was followed by Ms. Mahda Tewolde and Ms. Yohanna P. Teklu, Eritrean Womens' s Association UK. The first topic was: "Engaging and Empowering Women for Sustainable Peace" by Ms. Mahda Tewolde: She pictured the process the Eritrean women went through in the course of the liberation of their country: from 1961 on, women started to step out of their traditional roles. Around 1974 they began to participate fully in the liberation movement, even fighting at the frontline. They proved themselves to be equally devoted and active. By 1980 women were fully engaged in politics and the economy. The social changes could not have taken place without the women's participation. Also, the National Union of Eritrean Women worked in towns and villages to educate the people, especially the women and children. Their topics were: marriage, education, health, work. Forced marriage and child marriage were banned. In summary we can say that there has been a huge change in women's lives to the better. Gender equality laws have been implemented. The topic of the liberation of the Eritrean women was continued by Ms. Yohanna P. Teklu: In the course of the Eritrean liberation for the first time a law was passed that allows women to own land. Following independence, 30% of the seats in the Parliament went to women. In rural areas local courts were instituted with at least one female judge. Special efforts were made to eradicate FGM, by making it illegal and by conducting awareness raising programs of the devastating consequences of FGM. The former FGM ladies were trained to become midwives and to teach about the harmfulness of FGM. 1995: 95% of the population practiced FGM, 2015: 15%.The goal is to reach Zero cases of FGM. Also, now there is rigorous punishment for rape and domestic violence. By building schools and Colleges the state is aiming at eradicating illiteracy. The education is free of charge. Since then there has been a rise of female students to 52-54%! An Adult literacy program has been started by the UNESCO: 89% of the participants are women! Health care centers have been built within a distance of every 10 kilometers, so that 78% of the population has access to health care within this short distance. The maternity mortality rate and the child mortality rates have been drastically decreasing. Because of these rapid developments Eritrea received an award by UNICEF. The women don't have to spend so much time for doing the household work anymore, so they are able to work in other areas, like farming and starting small enterprises.

As guiding principles, Ms. Teklu mentioned that if a society doesn't respect the rights and the equality of women, it is not a liberated society. The next speech was given by Mrs. Etenesh Hadis, Founder and Head of the African Women's' organization in Austria. Her topic was: "The Role of the Peace Process in the Horn of Africa to bring Stability and economic Development": At war, women, children, husbands, all are victims. Eritrea and Ethiopia were at war for 2 decades. Two months ago the Prime Minister of Ethiopia and the president of Eritrea met and started the reconciliation process. The borders were reopened. Now we can move freely between the two countries which benefits both of them. The Ethiopian Prime Minister also continued to make peace with the other neighboring countries: Egypt, Somalia, the South Sudan, North Sudan, and Tschibuti. She stated aso the importance of quality leaders: People have to act



according to their leader; if he does wrong and uses his power to suppress, all people suffer. If he uses his /her position to act well and in a righteous way, than he/she is a good example for his/her people

Session 2: The Role of Education in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation Before this session started, the audience heard a beautiful song of peace, performed by the gospel singer Rachelle Jeanty.

Mr. Fred Ohenhen, born in Nigeria introduced "Interkulturelle Bildungsarbeit in Kindergärten und Schulen (IKU)", ISOP, Innovative Social Projects, in Graz. This organisation received the Intercultural Achievement Award 2018 (given by the Ministry of external affairs) for their successful activities. It is bringing together people of different ethnical and cultural backgrounds through having extended exchange, over a period of 3 or more months. The tool is cultural exchange with children (school or kindergarden) thereby countering prejudice or racism. All kinds of cultural activities are used: Dancing, singing, handicraft, cooking and baking. At some point also the parents are involved.

The country of Syria greatly supports this activity, in the understanding, that when children have some happy experience with people from Asia, Africa, etc. that they will look at them differently even when they grown up! ISOP offers: African and Syrian dances Family festivals where Austrian and migrant families can meet Events for social political topics Work- shops for cooking or drumming Possibilities for free exchange of talents and skills Mr. Mamadou Kone, born in Mali, spoke about Education, a Path to Prevent Conflicts and Promote Peace He mainly referred to character education starting in the family. He also pointed out that the media has a big responsibility, since "Bad news are good news", instead of reporting about positive events. That could make a good impact, especially on our youth. Social injustice and exclusion lead to conflict. Also, a political agenda is needed. The civil society has to organise itself, if the promotion of a conscience of peace is not done by the decision makers. We need to understand diversity. Fairness, the capacity to create a society of stability and education as a human right can lead to peace.

Dr. Maria Riehl: "Forgive, Love and Unite" Started with the story of her own life: Being born and raised in Slovakia – at that time Czechoslovakia. She came as a medical student to Vienna, light-hearted, wanting to learn German. When it was time to return back home all of a sudden the situation had changed completely - the Walshaw Pact troops had marched into the capital Prague. From there on she remained in Austria with the status of refugee.

She stated that reconciliation starts with understanding all of us were human beings. My enemy is not outside of myself or my country. People are aggressive, if they cannot control themselves anymore. This energy within oneself has to stop. Wars always produce destruction of the earth, poverty and wounded persons on both sides. For a short time there is peace but the feeling of revenge can soon appear again. War can never justify the death of people. Dr. Riehl then explained the "Bridge of Peace Ceremony", a rite that has been used by WFPW many times since 1995 (50 yrs. after the end of WWII) for the healing of inner wounds and resentment caused by conflict and war. Women of former enemy countries meet and by walking over a symbolic bridge from both ends towards each other thereby they ask for and offer forgiveness and reconciliation. Often this is expressed by bowing and embracing each other. If people don't see the other person as their enemy, they can begin to learn a lot from one another. Once we can see each other as brothers and sisters differences will not matter so much anymore.

Reported by Elisabeth Cook, Gaby Zöhrer und Renate Amesbauer  
WFPW Vienna (Austria)

