

WFWP Middle East: 26th Women's Conference For Peace In The Middle East

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The 26th Women's Conference for Peace in the Middle East was a virtual conference held over two days, November 30 through December 1, 2021. The conference was hosted by the Women's Federation for World Peace Middle East (WFWP ME) and discussed the various mediation processes towards peace efforts and reconciliation in the Middle East and North Africa regions.

This yearly conference brings together concerned women leaders coming from the MENA region, Europe and beyond. Participants include government leaders, NGO presidents, academics and social activists. Although peace issues are different for each country, the women participants always have a strong motivation to bring peace acknowledging the issues of their neighboring countries.



On the first day of this 26th conference, Dr. Manal Bouhaimed, Consultant Ophthalmologist and Assistant Professor in Clinical Ethics at Kuwait University was the first speaker. She said that the theme of peace and its relevance to women is a "holy message" and that "it comes directly from the Holy Quran."

As a doctor, academic staff member and ethicist, Dr. Bouhaimed always tries to encourage, inspire and empower her students. She says that coming from Kuwait, a very tiny country, with a total population of fewer than 5 million people, the majority of whom are non-Kuwaiti's, it has always been a struggle to convey a message of peace, especially in a region that has been plagued with wars, crisis and conflict. She explained that she was able to tie issues of national security, peace and nuclear weapon bans in her medical lectures, which inspired her students. They were able to research more on the issues and eventually see how Kuwait is contributing to the international effort of a nuclear-free Middle East.

The next speaker was Dr. Houda Sefiani, a medical doctor from Morocco, specializing in pharmacotoxicology. She is a member of the World Health Organization International World Group for Drug Statistics Methodology. She discussed women's rights and human rights in Morocco and the impacts of Covid-19 on gender equality issues. "Justice and gender equality are requirements for peace within the family, society and within the world. The foundation for peace is rooted in the free and equal access to all human rights for all human beings, especially between men and women" she said.



Dr. Sefiani emphasized that women need to have free and equal access to education, choices for their life, religion and to feel free to think and express themselves in all situations. This is the way that peace, security and progress can be ensured. She explained that in Morocco, the situation has improved since 2000, with the progressive family law, but the covid-19 crisis impacted women in terms of education and economy, widening the social gaps between men and women.

Ending all forms of discrimination and gender violence against women and girls is not only a basic human right, but it is crucial in order to accelerate sustainable development. Empowering women and girls can improve economic growth and development in all areas, she also explained.

For the final speaker on November 30th, the conference welcomed Mrs. Kholoud W. Kassem from Lebanon. Mrs. Kassem is a politician, author, activist and member of the Global Network of Women in Politics, based in Beirut. She says she feels the need to give back to her community because "it is my duty as a capable individual."

Mrs. Kassem discussed the historical and theoretical issues of Lebanon. She said that the creation of Lebanon as a nation had a specific role to play, which she believes was a message to the region; "A message where eighteen different religions with some different ethnic groups, live together, prosper, experience mixed marriages between groups and succeed to produce an exclusive "melange" as a community," she said.

She explained that Lebanon enjoyed only short periods of peace in the 50s, but the civil war which broke out in 1975 and lasted for 15 years, disrupted peace mechanisms in the country and in the region. She feels that as of now, matters seem to be stagnant and things are not moving forward in terms of the welfare of the country, but she sees hope once peace is depoliticized and peace talks emerge both within external relations and domestic affairs.

On the second day, the case of Cyprus was covered. Cyprus, the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea is a beautiful place but suffers from division. The discussion covered the perspectives on peace and community life of two young professionals representing the Greek Cypriot Community and the Turkish Cypriot Community.

Dr. Christina Kaili is a Greek Cypriot who holds a Ph.D. in Sociology and is a researcher in Human Rights and Social Justice. Dr. Kaili is also an activist promoting gender equality and women's rights in the region. She believes that progress can be made through a global security structure based on feminist principles of cooperation, human security, environmental awareness, gender equality, transparency and pluralism.

"We live in a moment of political awakening. Feminist movements have been a warning for a long time now, for the silent pandemic of violence against women, especially during conflict. Now, the feminist movements are warning about climate change, exploitation and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for women. Now, there is an opportunity for social and political transformation" she said.

"Women raise questions about wealth distribution and natural resource exploitation including the lack of accountability of state institutions."

Ms. Natalie Hami is a Turkish Cypriot, freelance journalist, editor and blogger. Ms. Hami is also an activist working on promoting human rights, truth and justice. She lives on the Greek side of the island and is very much concerned about the future of Cyprus, in terms of political and societal relations. Her blog focuses on the main issues regarding the divisiveness of the island.



She discussed the 'Cyprus problem' regarding the Turkish Cypriot perspective, peace-building, the eradication of the Turkish Cypriot community and the role and challenges of women in the peace process.

"The reunification of the island means different things and benefits for each community. The problem is indeed multidimensional," she says. "Without reunification of the island, the Turkish - Cypriot community is at risk of eradication." This is due to systemic efforts following the 1974 invasion to change the demographic north of the island by consistently and persistently bringing settlers from mainland Turkey. Gender issues have also not been included in the leader-led negotiations regarding the Cyprus problem. To Ms. Hami, it seems that "leaders are most interested in paying lip service to enact change." There are no women at the peace talks and negotiation table, although women are an inherent part of the process and bring valuable perspectives. She says that "both Greek and Turkish Cypriot women have been painted as victims and continue to be presented in this light." "All women need to understand and acknowledge their value in the efforts towards a reunified Cyprus."

The last speaker of the conference was Ms. Carolyn Handschin, President of the UN NGO Committee in the Status of Women and Director of WFWPI UN Office. She shared the efforts that her office has made to promote reconciliation and peace efforts between Israel and Palestine and the projects encouraging women's human rights in Afghanistan. Her focus includes bringing women's voices into the United Nations and getting the right ideas across for innovation and change.

Ms. Handschin had first joined the Middle East Peace Initiative in 2002. She says that she had a completely different perspective on women in the Middle East. After her many interactions with them, she realized that Middle Eastern Women possess unique family values, recognizing patriarchy and having the attitude of "we are going to work with that and do something amazing ourselves as women in our society." Ms. Handschin is utterly moved by the kind of quality and courage of women in the Middle East.

Ms. Handschin spoke about the value of intergenerational trust; building on past experiences with the fresh ideas of young minds. She says "we want the voices of the young people but also it is important to give them the sense of the history that they stand upon". Ms. Handschin says that the dynamic of intergenerational relationships can truly produce the best results in terms of peace, collaboration and mutual understanding for all groups.

The conference ended with Arabic songs and music beautifully performed by two Lebanese musicians.