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The world's greatest, untapped alternative resource: women

Joan Chittister | Mar. 6, 2008 From Where I Stand

[Editor's Note: Sr. Chittister is in Jaipur, India, March 6-10, for the first international conference of the Global Peace Initiative of Women.]

I heard about a conversation last week that I thought explained just about everything we need to know about the current state of human affairs.

"Old woman," the young woman asked, "what is the heaviest burden a woman has to bear." And the old woman answered her, "Young woman, the heaviest burden a woman has to bear is to have no burden at all."

Whether or not that conversation really happened, I don't know. But I do know that the point of the story is all too true.

In a world where billions are poor and hungry, the world is now full of conferences intent on resolving problems that are crippling people's development.

Symposiums, think tanks and forums on global issues are being hosted everywhere.

A world whose favored thesis just a few years ago read, "the personal is political" is now chasing the idea that "the global is local." Conferences on global change, global development, global needs, global politics, global economics and global agendas swirl around the planet.

And yet, little changes.

The question is why? And the answer is hiding in plain sight.

These conferences will never solve the major problems facing the human community because half the human community is being left out of the conversation. Half the wisdom of the world is being ignored. Half the concerns of the human race are not even being taken into consideration. Half the resources of the world, women, are not being tapped to solve the problems that face us all.

Both halves are suffering from our failure to approach both problems and solutions from the vantage point of the entire human race.

The fact is that the experience and insights of women are glaringly and regularly absent from global conferences that purport to be concerned with both the problems the world faces and their possible solutions.

We are not going to change the world by repeating old and ineffective answers over and over again while leaving new ones out of consideration.

And yet we persist.

But not everywhere and not everyone.

Here in India -- the land of banyan trees whose roots speak of depth and endurance, of lotus flowers that speak of survival and beauty under the grimmest of circumstances, and of goddesses like Lakshmi who is concerned with human enrichment, both material and spiritual, of Durga who protects the righteous and of Sarasvati who brings learning and wisdom to the ignorant and superficial -- here the other half of the human race is gathering to be heard around the globe.

More than 450 women from more than 45 countries have come to Jaipur, India, to make a difference, to unmask the woeful absence of the other half of the human race in the resolution of the greatest issues facing the human condition -- to be the launching ground for another kind of reflection -- on the human condition, to raise the ideas of the invisible in clear cadence, and loud voice -- to give this eagle wings!

Have no doubt about it: This first international conference of the Global Peace Initiative of Women, "making way for the feminine for the benefit of the world community" is a potentially life-changing enterprise.

No matter what else happens as a result of this conference, it will transform each of us here in ways that touch the soul, if only to make us even more aware and more resolute, in our desire to awaken this world to the ideas, insights, energy, care, compassion, concern, intelligence and intent of women than we were before we came.

But we have the potential to transform many others, if we band together and trust in the support of one another. We can give others:

- The courage to speak because they will know someone has spoken for them;
- The strength to endure the heat of the public arena because they will know someone has stepped into the light before them.
- The freedom to think and trust those thoughts because they will know someone -- like us together -- has spoken first.

Indeed, such a gathering of women as this has the potential to change the world for women everywhere if we will only try, if we will only persist, if we will only risk raising the questions and concerns that remain unasked and unattended to by systems that ignore women.

Depending on your criteria and definition of a country, the current count of nations in the world ranges from 189 to 266. Of these self-governing bodies of people, only 13 have women presidents or prime ministers. The lack of emphasis on feminine concerns for equality, compassion, nurturance and community building is at the base of every major social problem on the planet.

Over 90 percent of those killed in war are now, in our century, civilians -- and most of those are women and children. Technology and power do not bring either peace or protection of the innocent when nations fight for dominance. What kind of protection of the righteous is that?

Over 1 billion people, 20 percent of the population of the globe lack access to clean drinking water and 2.6 billion, almost half the people of the world, lack adequate sanitation. As disease and dehydration spread illness and death, no amount of government concern for political power will be able to suppress the spread of wars for water.

Of the world's 781 million illiterate adults, 64% are women. the implications of figures like that for the education of children, the advancement of families and the development of nations is resoundingly negative, deeply depressing. but those figures, those concerns, seldom if ever get to the decision-making arenas of the male world where male control counts for more than female literacy. what kind of wisdom is it that refuses to educate half the world?

Two-thirds of children not attending school are girls. If women were to receive the same education as men, agricultural productivity would increase by seven percent to 23 percent. Families could grow; countries would thrive; emigration would decline and the strain on global resources and multiple national economies would decrease. What kind of material and spiritual enrichment is that?

Selective abortions, despite national laws to the contrary, continue because men are valued and women are not. So the world loses the very gentleness and care, the very compassion and concern for others that is the ground of world peace. We are literarily depriving ourselves of the intellectual and spiritual resources the world desperately needs to develop if we are to survive.

Clearly the world needs the presence and participation, the perspectives and vision of women to bring us all back from the brink of human degradation and extinction. But to do that, we need women of courage as well as men of conscience who are able to understand the world's need for women's insights, education, equality and voice.

The first international conference of the Women's Global Peace Initiative is not convened for the sake of celebrating femaleness for its own sake. It is to offer the world the missing resource of our time, the power of the feminine.

Most important of all, perhaps, this conference is not an exercise in anybody's chauvinism, national or local, female or male. This conference will raise women's voices in international affairs for the sake of the whole human race. Without an increase in the feminine qualities of compassion, care, human community and human support in both women and men in a world that gives power preference over preservation, we are all in danger.

Women from all over the world are coming to India, the home of the goddesses, to take their responsibility in bearing the burdens of the world -- whether anyone else yet has the sense to invite them to do their share of it or not.

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