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Like water on stone: Asian women's strategies for peace

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HUA HIN, Thailand --An Asian women theologians' conference held recently in Thailand explored how women, through purposeful and sustained action, can bring about peace in situations of conflict.

Twenty-eight women theologians from 11 Asian countries and two collaborators from the West gathered in Hua Hin, Thailand, Aug. 26-30 to discuss "Practicing Peace: Toward an Asian Feminist Theology of Liberation."

Gemma Tulud Cruz, 39, a Filipino theologian who is currently a visiting assistant professor in the Catholic Studies program at DePaul University in Chicago, the United States, attended the meeting.

In the following commentary, she shares the insights of participants of how women bring a much-needed "soft power" in a world defined by aggression:

In recognition of the fact that our world is increasingly marked by violence and conflict, over two dozen Asian women theologians recently gathered in Thailand.

For these women theologians, the conference is made even more important and urgent by the fact that in Asia today there is an increasing feminization of conflict and confrontation where women and girls are differently and disproportionately impacted.

In the Philippines, for example, a study by the Center for Women's Resources under the auspices of UNICEF revealed that 80 percent of persons displaced by armed conflict, particularly in the southern part of the country, are women and children. This disproportionate impact of conflicts on women could also be seen in Asian conflicts that have recently been raging, especially in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The conference was organized by Ecclesia of Women in Asia whose inception and first conference took place in 2002. The papers presented ranged from the idea of peacemaking in the Bible and the role of the feminine, interculturality, everyday acts of resistance, narratives, and rituals of liberation in practicing peace.

Highlights of the conference include the presentation by Sophie Lizares-Bodegon from the Christian Conference of Asia, a guest speaker. She spoke about Asian Protestant women's hermeneutics of peace. World-renown Thai bhikkuni (female Buddhist monk) Venerable Dhammananda spoke of what women bring or could bring in the work for peace from a Buddhist perspective.

One participant from offered anecdotal examples of how women had been negatively affected by a civil war. She recounted the sharing of a grief-stricken woman, a young mother of two children:

"I have nothing more to lose in my life. I have lost my husband, child and belongings while crossing the border. We were walking through the sea. The water level was above our chest. The baby was with me while he was carrying the elder one with a bag of clothes. Suddenly a loud blast made me turn back to my husband. Alas! He was floating in the red colored water and my child at his side ... I could do nothing but leave my dead child behind. The heavy shelling and firing forced me to move with the crowd to this camp where there is no help."

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the role of mothers or the qualities of motherhood in peace-building came out significantly in the papers and discussions. More specifically, a number of the participants believed that the feminine qualities of women could be instrumental in resolving conflicts. This was palpable not only in the academic paper presentations but also in the more creative ones which included a dance, a mural, and a quilt.

Venerable Dhammananda echoed this belief by saying that women's natural ability to give, nurture, care, and give life puts them in a strategic position to be agents of peace.

Woven, indeed, into the whole conference from its liturgies to the presentations as well as reflections and discussions is the conviction that women bring some kind of much-needed "soft power" in a world defined by aggression. For the participants, Asian women's strategies for peace are, in many ways, like water on stone. These are defined by purposeful, sustained, and indomitable action in the face of hard-core or deeply embedded conflict or violence.

In a continent where patriarchy is deeply entrenched, Asian women are no strangers to this approach. They themselves have been slowly but surely cracking at the rock-solid and centuries old discrimination against women in Asian cultures and religions.

Moreover, they are well aware that the work for peace is not easy. They also know that there is a vast difference between peace-building and peace-keeping. But whether they are LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning) or dalit, Sri Lankans or Indonesians, conservatives or progressives, academic or grassroots theologians, eco-feminists or just ordinary passionate citizens, they unwaveringly work for peace.

Some of the fruits of their struggle could already be seen in their own lives and in the lives of Asian women in their researches, in their movements, in their organizations, in their families, communities, and countries whose stories they have made visible throughout the conference. But, again, like water on stone, these women never rest; they never become complacent. For them, as long as violence plagues families, communities and countries, the struggle continues, the work goes on, the hope for peace lives on.

The text from Habakkuk which was read over and over again during the conference provides them with much-needed inspiration: "Write down the vision clearly upon the tablets so that one can read it readily. For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint. If it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late." (Habakkuk 2: 2-3).

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