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Working for gender justice saves lives

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

I go to a good number of interesting places and get a good amount of strange mail. Sometimes those two distinct dimensions of my life go together. Or not. This was one of those times when they both did and did not.

The letter was from a woman who wrote to tell me that she was shocked -- shocked -- to see me wasting my life on useless things. Meaning the place of women in the world. (Her words, not mine.)

"A man," she went on to instruct me, "is the head; women are the neck" in the male-female hierarchy of the human race. The woman, she explained, "can turn him any way she wants."

The implications of the letter writer's position were clear: a kind of "seeming" powerlessness is the only power a woman should have and man, the head, it seems, has no head at all. Men are here simply to be manipulated by women who refuse to take responsibility for their own ideas and desires and lives or who know better than he does what needs to be done. Not a pretty picture for either of them as far as I'm concerned.

And that is where the conference comes in.

An invitational conference, which was a joint project of the Gender Justice Initiative of the International World Court and the Nobel Women's Peace Initiative, was held in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, April 19-22, under the title, *The International Gender Justice Dialogue*. (See GenderJusticeDialogue.org)

It was there that I learned the difference between trivia and moral imperatives, between the power positions of "heads" and "necks."

The Dialogue brought together a select representation of women jurists, lawyers, prosecutors and women's advocates to consider the present status of women in the light of past U.N. gender goals. Women from all over the world, minus those trapped in airports by volcanic ash -- looked at three topics: Justice and Jurisprudence, Peace Talks and Implementation, and the Communication of a Shared Agenda for Global Gender Justice. Or to put it another way, they came to talk about how the courts are treating women, how women's issues -- like violence against women as an instrument of war -- are being recognized -- or not -- and how the war against women and its costs to society are being communicated on a global scale.

The findings on every level are limited, the gains are slim, and, if my letter writer is any kind of representative of global awareness, communication is clearly poor. But one thing is sure: no one -- though they are head or neck -- can claim any longer not to be able to discover these things for themselves. The Internet is full of gender justice information; research on the subject of women as a discrete category is required in almost every academic discipline now, and, for the first time in history, women are, at least, being counted in most categories in most countries. Most. Not all.

So what's the problem? The problem is that no matter how much we seem to know about the role and status of women, little or nothing is being done to protect women in wartime.

In our generation, women's very bodies have been turned into instruments of war.

Women are being subjected to mass rapes in order to humiliate the men of the country. According to UNIFEM, The United Nations Development Fund for Women, anywhere from 250,000-500,000 women were raped in Rwanda alone. In Darfur today, the battleground is women. In the Republic of the Congo, girl-child soldiers, pressed into service, were used not simply as 'soldiers' but as females in the sexual service of a male military.

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Women's bodies have become a strategy in wartime. The rape of Muslim women in the former Yugoslavia was intended to destroy the Muslim society there by diluting the blood lines and bringing "dishonor" to Muslim families.

Women are trapped in war zones without food or medicines or water. They are being sold across borders to satisfy the sexual appetites of raping warriors.

Then, without families or education or support, women are being left on the streets to raise the children the rape squads leave behind in them.

Yet little or nothing is being done about it by the institutions and officials who are responsible for the maintenance of justice in the public arena. Less is being done to guarantee either the safety or the domestic security of the noncombatant citizens of the world, most of whom are women and children.

Rape, the silent crime, the secret sin, is now defined by the courts as an instrument of war but never really prosecuted, let alone compensated. Rape is now called what it really is -- torture. But no cases of mass rapes alone has been brought before the International Criminal Court though thousands of women's lives have been shattered by it over and over again in the name of "just wars" and "national defense." And churches seldom, if ever, even refer to sex crimes as a dimension of war, despite their non-stop railings

and condemnations of extramarital sex, birth control pills and condoms, let alone abortion. What's wrong with this picture?

This is the kind of "trivia" the gender experts, feminist legal theorists, peace mediators, women's rights activists, U.N. personnel, children's rights advocates and academics were trying to figure out at the Gender Justice Dialogue.

From where I stand, that is not trivia. It is not the waste of a life to work for that kind of gender justice. It is not useless. But I would like to know what "the neck" herself is doing to save women less safe, less abused than herself. Or, if not herself, at least what she has directed her husband, the "head," to do for women -- if nothing else but see that all the women in his company are being paid for bearing responsibilities equivalent to his, along with the years of back pay it will take to even the score. After all, food, utilities, rent and insurance cost a woman without a "head" exactly what it costs a man without a "neck."

[**Editor's Note:** Watch a video clip of Chittister at the International Gender Justice Dialogue.]

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