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“Impact of Culture and Religion on Women’s Rights”

It is a privilege for me to attend this conference and to share with you some reflections on tensions and synergies of culture, religion and women’s rights.

I recall the very important first conference in this series held in Jakarta two years ago as a joint initiative of The Islamic University of Jakarta and the Royal Norwegian Embassy. We were a few male speakers and participants. Here we are even fewer. If we continue like this there will be no men at the next. That would be a pity because men need to listen to the voices of women on issues of peace, human rights and human dignity. In addition it is a sobering learning experience for men to be in minority in the otherwise male dominated culture of international conferences

Among the organizers in Jakarta was Ms. Eva Irene Tuft, the Head of the Norwegian Mission here in Timor Leste. Prominent among the speakers was the then First Lady of Timor Leste, Kirsty Sword-Gusmao. Their dedication to the cause of women for peace and their enthusiasm for cross cultural and inter religious efforts has led to the organizing of this event here in Dili. It is my hope that a third conference may follow some place in the region to enhance the role of women in nation-building.

I wish to congratulate the Alola Foundation, the organizing committee, and all those who have made this conference possible. I laud the Norwegian Mission to Timor Leste for its unwavering support for the softer human aspects of nation-building. This conference thus adds to other initiatives here in Dili, such as the “Conference on Justice for the Poor – Time to Deliver” (2007) and “Youth-Identity and Nation-building” (2008).

In a letter to the friends of the Alola Foundation, Kirsty Sword Gusmao writes: “Tremendous expectations exist of East Timorese women and their ability to contribute to the social and economic life of their families and communities and yet they are accorded little acknowledgement and granted very little power in public and political life.” I note that the Prime Minister is signaling that he has heard such voices for a greater role of women in appointing gender focal points in all ministries and submitted a gender sensitive budget. This conference I believe is about responding to some of the expectations and about empowering women in Timor Leste to play an even more active role in the shaping the future of this young state created by and for an old nation.

The significance of focusing in 2009 on the role of women in nation-building is of course heightened by the fact that we this year celebrate the tenth anniversary of the referendum when the people of Timor Leste with an overwhelming majority broke the chain of oppression and ushered in a new chapter in the history of this nation. But freedom always has its price. We mourn all those who lost their lives as a result of the atrocities that were unleashed upon the people following the referendum in 1999.

Attempts to turn back the wheel of history and to crush the hope for independence and human rights did not succeed. In the long march to freedom for the people of this beautiful nation, women have shared the heaviest burden. Alongside participating in the resistance in many ways, they have attended to the daily chores of

raising the family. They have struggled for daily bread, and they have been caring for the sick and elderly. As carriers of hope they have been sustained by their faith and their ancient traditions and cultural values. Women are equal heroes with men and should be honored and recognized for their costly devotion to a better future for this nation. Their voice is important in pursuing justice, truth and reconciliation in dealing with the past and in building bridges to the next generation.

It is on this historic backdrop that we today are asked to consider the role of culture and religion for women's rights. Indeed it makes sense not only to speak of human rights in general but to consider women's rights in particular.

Let me first remind us of a broad consensus that has developed within the UN-family of nations, a consensus that has been possible because of a committed leadership of women and men.

There is today a shared understanding that gender equality is necessary to achieve the vision of a world where peace prevails. Gender equality is imperative if people are to realize their human potential as active participants in a pluralistic global community. This applies equally to Timor Leste and to Norway. Women's resources, experiences, life skills, priorities and preferences must on equal terms with men's shape the construction and development of our modern societies. Without women's active participation on their own premises in social development, the human family will never be able to enjoy and celebrate its fullest potential.

There is today broad recognition that in the implementation of the principle of gender equality all sectors of society must strive for balance of power and influence between women and men. This requires mutual recognition and respect. Equality can be achieved if both women and men work together to change inherited power structures and gender roles which hinder the realization of a shared humanity and equal dignity for all.

Timor Leste has already in 2003 ratified The Convention on Elimination of All Forms of discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This convention may be described as a Magna Charta for women.

The Convention defines discrimination against women as "...any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment and exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."

Let me also refer to the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 from Oct.31st 2000 on women, peace and security, which has a special relevance in post-conflict Timor-Leste.

This resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace-negotiations, peace-building, peace-keeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction. The resolution urges increased participation of women and incorporation of gender perspectives in all UN peace and security efforts. It also calls on all parties to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse in situations of armed conflict.

Women's participation in peace-building efforts brings in new perspectives into peace building processes and ensures a higher degree of inclusion, transparency and ownership in negotiations.

In spite of consensus it is true to say that there remains a regrettable lack of recognition in many societies of women's contribution to nation building. This comes from both within their local and their national communities. Thus the overall political

climate in some parts of the world has not made it easy to gain understanding for the positive contributions of women in general to social development

It is noteworthy that the Executive Director of UNICEF, Ms. Ann Veneman frequently underscores that peace and sustainable development are more attainable when women have a central role. She discusses this in the context of religion and culture. She emphasizes that the authoritative voice of religious institutions is vital because much of the gender inequality that exist has historically been justified by reasons of culture, tradition or religion. “Religion must become a tool that helps address the unequal treatment of women, rather than a means of perpetuating it.”

The lasting legacy of the international society reflects insights which have been transcending religious and cultural differences. Even when at times in tension with the letter of religious writ, the international human rights canon represents genuine interpretations of the spirit of great religious teachings on the value and dignity of the person regardless of gender, race, class and other traditional distinctions.

The word “religion” means “binding together” and thus connotes relationship. It expresses a widely shared need to see one’s life interconnected with other human beings, with nature itself and with the Divine. In this way religions impact every sphere of life,

As I work with people of different faiths within the global organization “Religions for Peace”, I am impressed by a strong common ground on dignity and equality based on faith in the Creator. It should be recognized that the huge transformations in gender roles in recent times have gained support from many faith-leaders and communities in spite of prevailing concerns around the family on many fronts. There is a also a broadening recognition of the need for women’s empowerment and for their enhanced opportunities in all spheres of society including religious institutions. Civil society has long been a strong arena for women’s leadership and participation. The political realm on regional, state and international level is increasingly impacted by women.

The ambition of women to participate in all spheres of society on equal level with men, should come as no surprise to religious leaders. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, we are all created in the image of God. The narratives of Jesus’ encounters with women represent a dramatic shift. He breaks with the dominant interpretation in his cultural and religious environment where gender made a difference in your social and religious status. The great commandment to love your neighbor as it is recorded in the holy scriptures of Jews, Christians and Muslims, and which is found in different forms in all religions also argues equality between men and women. Neighbor is a gender- neutral term.

There should however be no denial that there continue to exist tragic gaps between ideals of dignity and opportunity on one hand and actual practice on the other. In spite of the biblical affirmations of equality of men and women, the teaching that universal rights is to be fully shared and enjoyed by all humanity are often thwarted or sabotaged. This may be caused by political expediency as well as by male dominated interpretations and patriarchal traditions. Often religion and culture have been reinforcing each other in giving women a lesser human dignity

Even in the 21st century, fear of modernity easily finds an alliance with religion and culture. Fundamentalism in all forms is generally anti-modernist, anti-democratic and male chauvinist.

It is obvious that when we address the role of culture and religion for women’s rights, we are dealing with issues which are sensitive culturally and religiously, even politically. But in the interest of a better future for generations of girls worldwide, we need to break the silence of suffering caused by patriarchal interpretations of holy traditions and of cultural bias.

All religion is interpreted religion. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish religion from culture. At times religions interpret culture and culture impacts religion. Every religion needs renewal by reinterpretation of holy traditions. Scriptures read through women's lenses open a new richness of interpretations which may serve to rescue religion from irrelevance. That is why feminist theology is to be found in all religions today, not only in liberal western influenced Christian thought. Its critique of a male dominated school of theological interpretation should be welcomed if not necessarily canonized.

It has become more evident than ever before that some of the most important global challenges of our time have religious dimensions, whether it is climate change, nuclear threat, or the implosion of the dominant economic world. Nor is it possible to speak of an "alliance of civilizations" without recognizing the role of religion and culture in world affairs. For better or worse!

If it is true that religion has shaped history and is integrated in all civilizations, then we can do no better than to explore its relevance for humanity also in the 21st century, at a time when there is a sense of humankind come of age. And if religion is here to stay, even as humankind is reaching a greater sense of togetherness in the ever smaller global village, we are called to seek the common ground of values for the world of today.

If it is true that religion is about life, and promises life in abundance, then of course the challenge is to detect the interconnectedness of religious values to *everyday life* – to experience of suffering and healing, to poverty and fair distribution, to equal dignity of men and women, to empowerment of the disenfranchised and marginalized, to children and youths, to a future of this planet beyond the threat of mass extinction by the tsunamis of nuclear war, climate change, and the Aids epidemic.

In some countries the place and role of women within the religious community and in society has become a critical issue. It sharpens the issue of inherited values and of interpretation of human rights and it challenges the understanding of the inherent dignity and equality of every human being. Connected to this are issues of sexuality, taboos and malpractices rooted in traditions but sanctioned by some religious authorities

There is a special need to enhance capacities of religious communities to support and monitor the enforcement of laws and restore the dignity of abused women and girls, and to advocate against crimes such as rape and all forms of dehumanizing attitudes from men and in male dominated cultures. The need to address issues related to reproductive health right is obvious especially in developing nations. Obviously this can not be discussed without awareness of the changing role of women in a global society.

But if religion indeed is a fundamental ingredient to the shaping of history and even of culture, the challenge for people of every faith is to speak honestly of religion not only as part of the answer but also as part of the problem. This is a soul-searching exercise which needs to be undertaken in every faith, not only on global level, but also in local villages and communities. In this dialogue we need to engage not only people of other faiths but also people who have no faith in a religious meaning. Religious and traditional leaders who are part of the problem can become part of the solution if engaged in an honest dialogue

If there is a more universal recognition today that religions represent a unique spiritual, moral and social capital which is important for the common good, it is because acts of mercy, healing and justice have interpreted more genuinely than many words the true sense of faith.

If there is a growing awareness that religious assets for building the common good are needed to complement the capacities of government and other civil society

actors, it is my conviction that this source should be even more fully utilized in the pursuit of peace.

In conclusion let me underscore the following lesson from encounters with women for peace: Women are the most sensitive recorders of the daily human realities in every religion and culture. Women are the authentic interpreters of the human rights abuses on women in times of peace and war. No man is better positioned than they are to unmask the many cultures of violence against women, mental, physical and psychological.

Therefore your voice, your witness and your perseverance in the pursuit of human rights is needed in every society. Your call to sisters and brothers in all faith communities around the world, and in all cultural contexts, to address these issues, is an important contribution to the global struggle for a better world.

I leave you with a word that translates well in all cultures: Blessed are the peacemakers.