



**Civilian Peace Service Canada (CPS) Conference:
"Women Building Peace"
February 15 to 17, 2009, Saint Paul's University, 223 Main Street,
Ottawa**



This conference followed from the very successful dinner hosted by the Canadian Department of Peace Initiative (CDPI) held in September, honoring the contribution of women to peace. The conference is developed in cooperation with the CDPI, Saint Paul University, the Canadian Institute for Conflict Resolution (CICR), the Rideau Institute, Canadian Voice of Women for Peace, and One World Inc. Organizers acknowledge, with appreciation, the PSAC Social Justice Fund, Parliament Hill Local 70390, Canadian Voice of Women for Peace, One World Inc., MDR Associates Conflict Resolution Inc. for the contributions made to the success of the conference.

**Lauryn Oates,
February 17, 2009**

Biography:

Lauryn Oates is a Canadian human rights activist whose work concentrates on international development, gender equity and education in conflict zones. She has worked throughout the Muslim world and holds particular expertise on Afghanistan, as an advocate for women's rights there since 1996. She is a fierce proponent of internationalism, the universalism of human rights, and frequently speaks out against cultural relativism. She is the founder of the Vancouver (1999) and Montreal (2001) Chapters of the non-profit solidarity network, Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan and is currently Project Director with their Excel-erate Teacher Training Program. She managed the CIDA-funded Women's Rights in Afghanistan Fund and other projects supporting women's movements and peacebuilding in the Middle East and Central Asia from 2002-2006 at the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development. In 2004 she conceived Ideaccess, which translates and distributes human rights and women's rights information and tools into Arabic, Farsi and other languages free of charge in the Middle East and Central Asia. In 2006 Ideaccess was a finalist in the Stockholm Challenge, receiving honourable mention at the Nobel Hall in Stockholm. She is a founding member of the Canada Afghanistan Solidarity Committee and Coordinator of the Funders' Network for Afghan Women.

Lauryn holds a BA Honours in International Development Studies from McGill University, an MA in Human Security and Peacebuilding from Royal Roads University, and is a PhD student in Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia. Her graduate thesis research was concerned with the links between access to information and the growth of civil society in the Middle East and Central Asia and her current doctoral research is focused on the development of mother tongue teaching resources using communications technologies (ICT) for primary teachers in Gulu, northern Uganda. She is the recipient of several awards and distinctions, including the 2000 Chatelaine Women of the Year, the 2001 National Post/L'Oréal Canada Women of Influence, and a YTV Achievement Awards finalist for Public Service. In 2008, The Globe & Mail named her as the first of ten Canadians to watch in 2009. She is based on Bowen Island, BC and is a partner with Ready, Set, Global Consulting.

Presentation Summary:

Cultural Dissent: Supporting Women's Agency through Information *An Approach to Rights Affirming and Culture-Sensitive Peacebuilding in Afghanistan*

This paper focuses on Afghanistan as a case study in women and peacebuilding, where the rule of law, women's human rights, and the power and meaning given to religion and culture are inherently intertwined with the role of women there in building peace. Activists are already working on a number of areas outlined in 1325 without having ever heard of 1325. Referencing their demands to 1325, to the extent that it proves useful for them, may strengthen their advocacy efforts when seeking policy change from the Afghan Government, NATO or from international donors. Identifying the synergies in 1325 and in the rights women believe that Islam owes them is the essential starting point. Those from the international community wishing to support such an effort will need to first allow Afghan women to identify how and where there are linkages to their current work, including to the slow and quiet revolution of cultural dissent.

Afghan women activists overwhelmingly tend to use reference to Islam as their most potent tool in advocating for rights. In terms of relevance, significance and applicability, the rights bestowed to women by Islam take precedence over rights under international law and domestic law such as the Constitution or the Civil Code for instance, although most activists usually have at least some knowledge of women's rights norms under international law and domestic law. However, international human rights are easily reconciled with women's rights under Islam, according to numerous Muslim scholars¹- depending which interpretation one chooses to listen to.

Legal scholar Madhavi Sunder has pointed out how international human rights law can even be problematic for women in terms of its approach to the autonomy of religious and cultural communities. Sunder points out that international human rights law (IHRL) protects freedom of religion, granting autonomy to the beliefs, interpretations, institutions and governance of religious and distinct cultural communities without providing clear protections for dissenters within the religious communities. IHRL assumes there is choice within a given religious community. Dissent is allowable when human rights are breached but dissenters often feel compelled to leave their religious community in order to dissent. IHRL typically does not recognize that the status quo of a religious community is often set by a small group of power holders and excludes certain groups (such as women) or the majority of adherents from taking part in determining the rules and selecting the interpretations. IHRL's freedom of religion may not be attentive to the political motives underlying the power structures within religious communities, or recognize the history of patriarchy which characterizes most major religions in the world.

This approach leads to a separation: human rights for the public realm; religion and culture for the private realm. What happens within the private realm then falls outside of IHRL. In other words, the law does not look behind closed doors. If a dissenter wants to expose human rights violations within the private realm (within their religious community), they can exit the religion and then dissent; but it is harder, legally speaking, to insist, for example, "I do not agree that stoning women to death is Islamic, and I am a Muslim." So how can we support women to gain the human rights that they believe they are entitled to from a religious perspective without ostracizing them from their own faith or cultural community? Firstly, by dissecting the power structures within religious communities, and asking who decides what it means to be a member of the religion, or to belong to a particular cultural identity. Who

¹ See for instance, Abdullah A. An-Na'im, Fatima Mernissi, or Mahnaz Afkhami.

wrote the laws which govern behaviour, expectations and roles in the community? Who participated in deciding the policies, assumptions in place, or who interpreted the sacred text?

Muslim women's rights and peace activists have been undertaking the practical work which mirrors Sunder's development of the theory of cultural dissent. Organizations such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Sisters in Islam, and Women's Learning Partnership have been working to open up women's access to information, laws, alternative interpretations of sacred texts, ideas and viewpoints so that women can begin participating in shaping the meaning of belonging to a certain cultural or religious community by unearthing forgotten history, the political motives behind a dominant interpretation, or interpreting the Qu'ran or the Hadiths themselves for the first time. In particular, access to comparative sharia law is critical. Islam has not been interpreted in its governance and legal manifestations the same way in any two countries, and has even often been interpreted differently from province to province or from village to village in certain countries (such as Pakistan). This is testament to the fluidity, dynamism and flexibility by which religion can be used to either suppress rights or to advocate for them.

Theorists such as Sunder and the practitioners such as the activists behind global networks like Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Sisters in Islam, and the Women's Learning Partnership and countless Afghan women's organizations are pioneering human rights that are based in the dynamic natures of religions and in the untapped ability of women to contribute to defining the perimeters of their religious and cultural communities. They recognize that real, lasting change comes from within the community and from the emergence of women's voices. Supporting these emerging voices- through tools, funding, knowledge brokering, technical and capacity assistance, advocacy and international solidarity- is how women's peacebuilding in Muslim conflict and post-conflict contexts can be most holistically supported by those from outside Afghanistan wishing to assist such efforts. It must ultimately be a partnership effort rooted in supporting the empowerment of the other half, women, to shape the kind of society they want to live in- one which bestows on them a more rights-based, inclusive, progressive interpretation of the religious and cultural worlds they belong to.

Questions and Answers:

Question: Whether women remain at home and the men are at war

Answer:

The question was whether women have the caring and men are the warriors. This has been debated. I don't buy into that at all. It is situational. Literature is coming out on that. It is more about the enabling kind of environment. Susan affirmed my belief. We cannot just do peace building. We need to latch on to other professions. We need to bring peace into the educational curriculum, so education is used as a tool for peace rather than as a tool for war.... Royal Rhodes, for example.... Similarly for other professions: professionals need to get trained in their fields, then get trained as well in human peace building, and then go back to work their sectors with the peace perspective added.

Examples of societies that are changing: Costa Rica...Nepal...In the 19th century 10 or 20 families ruled Bolivia. They sent their children to Europe to be educated. When they returned, they brought with them alternative ways of running the country. They disarmed... even though they were surrounded by conflict and were told they would be invaded. Costa Rica does not have a standing army. Peace is woven into the culture. The Japanese did the same thing. The Samurai said that there should be no fire arms in Japan... Culture can change...

Question:

You mentioned supporting women without ostracizing them. Who is making the laws? They predetermine certain answers....

Answer:

I was referring to the local Religious law; whether it reflects the view of the local mulla. For example in Kandahar, when they opened the library for women, women did not come. They were illiterate. But when they opened a reading centre, women came, to read the Koran. They found there for the first time their own identity. For instance, the verse about men and women gaining knowledge was never mentioned by the local mulla. See the document: Women Under Muslim Law...a 25 year comparison... It is important to look at one's own role; to work in collaboration with local activities; to support local societies and take our cues from them... We brought women from countries in the region for training; looked at international human rights law. Afghan women learned what Iranian women's campaigns were and felt they could use them in Afghanistan. It's about supporting local societies, through funding etc.

Question:

The discussion is all about "here" and "over there". Is there an assumption that women in Canada are working together and are good... etc. I feel we have not worked together; that there is fragmentation. What are our struggles?

Answer:

The question is how to mainstream beyond a small group. Things have changed tremendously since I was in high school. Then, it was an uphill battle to find someone to take me in to work on rights issues. There was no human rights club, etc. Now I speak to schools around Canada and see a huge change. What frightens me a little bit, is that the desire to be involved comes from a place of insularity....I did not approach my work in Afghanistan from a perspective of charity or pity but from a perspective of solidarity. I felt that what was happening to women in Afghanistan was threatening to me as a woman, not as a Canadian. We do have a huge untapped resource of multi-culturalism in Canada. The onus is on organizations doing this kind of work to reach out to communities and if they are not engaging, then to find out why... We do have to take the initiative to reach out and work together... as citizens of the world, with fewer borders....

Question:

You said that if you could work in Afghanistan, anywhere else would be easy. All places are complex. Why was Afghanistan so difficult.

Answer:

It was a figure of speech. I just meant that it is complex...