Confronting violence and advancing shared security and the unique role of women of faith

Thank you for asking me to speak on this platform and to raise some of the issues that concern us all as women of faith. Allow me to refer to a piece from Gandhi ji’s writings on women and the Hindu religion, and in particular the scriptures known as the Smritis written by a sage known as Manu. Gandhi ji said the following:

The saying attributed to Manu that “for woman there can be no freedom” is not sacrosanct to me. It only shows that probably at the time when it was promulgated, women were kept in a state of subjection. The epithets used in our literature to describe a wife are ardhangana, ‘the better half’, and sahadharmini, ‘the helpmate’. The husband addressing the wife as devi or Goddess does not show any disparagement. But unfortunately a time came when the woman was divested of many of her rights and privileges and was reduced to a status of inferiority.” He goes on to show how in the scriptures “there are texts that are in conflict with other texts”.

Gandhi ji further stated, “Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man, and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he... I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality.”

He makes three fundamental points in these statements,

1. That our scriptures, and this is true for all scriptures that can be interpreted in many ways, contain contradictory statements. Gandhi ji as many other religious leaders advocates the importance of studying the texts carefully and reinterpreting them from a feminist or gender perspective.

2. That we have adhered to a particular interpretation over the years and passed it on from generation to generation through the differential treatment of our boys and girls and may I add that fundamentally we as mothers are in most cases responsible for the nurture and informal education of our children, so we have to accept the responsibility for the differential treatment we met out to our sons and daughters.

3. That in fact men and women are basically complementary to each other and equal in status and both should enjoy the same freedom and equality.

The challenges that we face today hinge on these truths.

We as women of faith need to reclaim our status and power in our communities, through the reinterpretation of our scriptures from the gender perspective.

I come here as a social, political and religious activist. But above all I am a woman.
I am concerned about the critical challenges facing us in the present century and about the situation in which women find themselves. Some of these are:

1. Even though most women are against war and violence, wars violence of various kinds-at macro and micro levels are thrust on women. Women are at the suffering end of violence in most cases.

We experience violence in many ways.

1. Physical violence inflicted by striking a person
2. Sexual violence and there are many definitions of it
3. Verbal violence inflicted by harsh, demeaning words
4. emotional violence inflicted by disrespect, disregard of feelings and emotions or by harassment
5. Psychological violence inflicted by carefully orchestrated verbal and other cues which lead to psychological scarring
6. Economic violence inflicted through a deliberate deprivation of any right to access from the family pool of funds or through abject poverty with no means of income generation available
7. Structural or institutional violence which is inflicted by the state systems which are so structured that they thrive on a pool of poverty stricken cheap labor, or are not responsive to the needs of those who are for various reasons unable to fend for themselves
8. Environmental violence through gross negligence and lack of care of environmental impact

Violence can be viewed at a micro level at home or at a macro level in wars, but the dynamics are the same. Violence occurs in societies as a direct result of poverty which in turn results in exposure to diseases such as HIV/AIDS, criminal violence, ethnic cleansing, and other forms of violence that storms though countries with devastating effects, such as what we see in the various countries affected by war and violence. The manifestation of violence can be described as a vicious circle, spiraling on to greater and more ghastly forms of attacks. Today as we stand here we remember the effects of the atom bomb on this country and it's people and while we pray that such weapons are never used again we know that man's inhumanity has reached such heights since the beginning of this millennium that one wonders where it will stop. Weapons today are more accurate and able to reach their targets. But the nature of the bombardment is more vicious and deadly and as a result we see that more people are dying in wars and violence inflicted by man against man, than deaths as a result of natural disasters. Again is it not possible that our own negligence and irresponsibility in some way contributes to the causes of these natural disasters. At the end of the last Millennium, many religious heads warned that we are walking a tight rope. But the warning remains unheeded.

In an article in the African Journal on Conflict Resolution Kotze says that: "Democratization is directly and positively correlated with conflict resolution or prevention. That socio-economic development is directly and positively correlated with participatory democracy and therefore democratization and socio economic and sustainable development is necessary prerequisites for the resolution or prevention of deep rooted conflict."

Statisticians have shown that in most wars and violent situations fewer women actually participate in direct combat or even in roles as accessories, yet women and children are amongst the most affected by wars and violence.
A large majority of women continue to play a servile role, with few if any rights. Within society women are treated as subordinates and in many subtle ways women continue to live under an oppressive patriarchal society. Women are the major sufferers of abuse in the home, in society, and, in war time, the abuse of women takes on an even more bizarre specter. Women of faith are also affected by these patriarchal beliefs. Our scriptures are written and interpreted by males.

In recent reports of the crises in the Middle East, in various parts of Africa and Eastern Europe and Sri Lanka, one sees that among the casualties, a large majority are women and children. The majority of the refugees seeking shelter elsewhere are women and children. In South Africa, during the years of apartheid violence we found that women were the largest number of victims of displacement, of suffering because homes and families were destroyed, of being violated and killed. Most wars bring out the worst in human beings, and rape torture and murder of women and children is a common feature of all violent conflicts. We heard many testimonies by women at the World Court of Women, sitting in Cape Town a few years back. Women came from many parts of the world and from South Africa to speak out and give testimonies of the crimes perpetrated against them. But these voices are seldom heard or heeded. In our own hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), 56.5% of the 21227 submissions came from women. Moreover 41% of the commissioners comprised women and 75% of the regional managers were women, yet women’s stories were not heard because they were considered to be secondary victims. Archbishop Tutu acknowledged this fact at the Sitting of the World Court of Women after hearing the testimonies given by South African women. We continue to suffer in silence.

According to Harriett Williams, “A key concern in the post conflict environment relates to the psycho social effects of the conflict on the population, which if not addressed, can seriously impede the recovery of a nation. Citing the Rwanda experience she writes, “The criminal courts in Rwanda and Sierra Leone should be applauded for setting international standards for the prosecution of perpetrators of sexual violence. These courts are an acknowledgement of women’s traumatic experiences and signal a commitment by their countrymen and the international community that such crimes are serious violations of human rights and will not be committed with impunity.”

One of the key challenges we face is for us to find our voices. We can begin by expressing ourselves within our faith communities. We need to unite as women and begin to address the issues of patriarchy thrust on us both by incorrect interpretations, and by continued entrenchment of the differential roles of males and females. To a large extent we as mothers are the culprits who continue the legacy we are subjected to, and take it forward by continuing the pattern of oppression. Centuries of oppression have left us as silent recipients of abuse, and ignorant of the potential we have within ourselves.

A story I was told a few years back by one of our women leaders about traditional forms of conflict resolution. She said that many years ago men would sit under a huge tree talking through the problems. Later when the time comes to take a decision, they would adjourn the meeting for the next day. They would come home and discuss the issues with their wives and go back the next day inspired into taking a decision, often times as directed by women.

Women do have the skills but because of the nature of our society those skills are seldom attributed to women, and often suppressed by women who refuse to talk about them.
We have seen that in many situations in Africa for instance where women have played a leading role in resolving conflict and in the consolidation of the peace efforts the possibilities of a sustainable peace are greater.

In an article in Conflict Trends in Africa, Harriett Williams writes about, “What makes for successful post-conflict reconstruction……” she says, “Rule of law, human security, political economic and state security, respect for human rights and participatory rights are all seen, and rightly so, to characterize a strong state. ….Throughout the continent, in various approaches to post conflict reconstruction, women have contributed immensely to the establishment of governance, reconciliation and economic structures. Much more needs to be done to improve women’s access to peace building processes and to ensure that their concerns are addressed.”

We women of faith can reclaim our power within our faith communities and use the machinery to help our sisters, brothers and children in distress. Our help can be in the form of three distinct and important ways.

- We can offer support to the victims
- We can help to prevent violent conflicts through our timely intervention and
- We can ensure that we build a society where the opportunity for violence are limited.

This can be realized:

1. if we begin to support each other across the religious divide.
2. if we build bridges and remove the barriers to constructive dialogue instead of war.
3. if we ensure that we promote both sustainable and developmental agendas rather than perpetuating poverty and deprivation which are the fertile soil in which conflicts and war thrive.

This year we in South Africa celebrate the 50th anniversary of a women’s march which took place in 1956 on 9 August. 20,000 women gathered together of all races religions from various professions from the villages and the cities to hand over a petition signed by thousand of people against the pass laws.

These women paved the way for us to play an active role in our country and we have since then continued to march on until we can truly say that all our women are indeed enjoying equal rights and opportunities.

Finally allow me to quote our first African Woman President, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, She said, “My administration shall… endeavor to give Liberian women prominence in all affairs of our country. My Administration shall empower Liberian women in all areas of our national life. We will support and increase the writ of laws that restore their dignity and deal drastically with crimes that dehumanize them. We will enforce without fear or favor the law against rape recently passed by the National Transitional Legislature. We shall encourage families to educate all their children, particularly the girl child. We will also try to provide economic programs that enable Liberian women-particularly our market women to assume their proper place in our economic process.”

Is this not a program worthy of replication in all our countries? As Women of faith we should make the realization of such a program our goal!