

It is such a pleasure for me to speak here at this Soroptimist dinner, particularly as the work that you do to advance the status of women is so closely related to the work that we, at the United Network of Young Peacebuilders, do to build a culture of peace amongst youth.

To explain briefly, UNOY Peacebuilders work in the field of peacebuilding and conflict transformation, focusing on youth, by empowering them through trainings, campaigning and managing the network. I will go into more details about this work later during the question and answer session, or you can read more about our work in the flyers that have been handed out. But for the moment, I would like to focus on our work in relation to the Culture of Peace a concept which the Soroptimist are also actively involved in.

Often peace is perceived as just the absence of war or direct violence. However, the absence of direct violence, or the absence of war does not mean that you have peace, if you are starving, if you are discriminated against in schools because of your skin colour, or at the workplace because of your gender. The absence of war and direct violence would therefore be just a passive or negatively defined peace. However, peace should not just be negatively defined against war. Rather, an active or a positively defined peace is a peace in which there is an absence of structural and cultural violence, and the presence of multiculturalism, cooperation, and celebration of differences.

I find it therefore, a very welcoming sign, to see that the Soroptimists have succeeded where many still fail, in embracing the concept of positive peace, and are working towards ending structural violence by advancing human rights, social justice and equality, and the empowerment of women, but also that you do this through promoting economic independence and greater participation in decision making at all levels. I wish to commend you for this and your work to advance a structural, positive peace,

At UNOY Peacebuilders, we are working within the framework of the 2001-2010 International Decade for the Culture of Peace and non-violence

This Culture of Peace that I speak about is a loosely defined concept that is primarily concerned with building a structural, positive peace.

There are eight elements that have been identified, although not exclusively, as action areas within the culture of peace,

These include:

- *Peace Education;*
- *Gender equality;*
- *Democratic Participation;*
- *Sustainable Development;*
- *Human Rights;*
- *Understanding, Tolerance, Solidarity;*
- *Free Flow of Information;*
- *International Peace and Security.*

In the process of building a culture of peace however, two major groups are often neglected. These are the groups that we, in fact, are representing here today: women and youth.

It would be redundant for me to say that the Soroptimists are working to redress this neglect of women, and I hope to hear more from you, after I finish my speech, about how you do this. But now, I would like to focus on youth, and how they have often been excluded from the peacebuilding process and why their participation is not just important, but also how their participation has, and can, made a difference.

The many arguments that we have heard for excluding youth include some of the following:

1. *Adults are there to take care of children and youth. And the youth should not be expected to shoulder their responsibilities. For the moment, youth should be allowed to enjoy their youth.*

A second argument, we often hear is that

2. *Involving young people in a project or decision is difficult and time consuming a luxury that cannot be afforded.*

Another would be

3. *Young people are unreliable and tend to change their minds often. They are too immature and naïve to make decisions, and cannot foresee the long-term consequences of their actions.*

Or

4. *Young people do not have the technical skill or necessary wisdom*

There are many more, and I am sure that you can relate from working in the field of advancing the status of women, how frustrating it is to be told that you, by virtue of who you are, cannot be trusted, or do not have the ability to be a participant in a matter that you hold close to your heart.

To illustrate how these arguments are often misplaced, I'd like to give three examples of the initiatives youth have taken to build peace.

*Gal*

Gal, is from Natanya in Israel. She found that one of the problems that were hindering efforts to build peace in the Middle East was the absence of trust. Gal decided to organize sleepovers between Arab and Israeli youths. While many families signed up to participate, when the actual day came, many children simply did not show up at the home of their host. To Gal, this only highlighted further the problem of there being a lack of trust, so she started an organization re'ut tzedaka, which means 'friendship and good deeds', and focuses on activities to slowly build trust between Arabs and Israelis.

## *Jesualdo*

Jesualdo is 25 and is from the Bucaramanga region in northern Colombia, where there is much violent conflict. As it happened, he had attended primary school with one of the leaders of the guerilla movement in Bucaramanga region. When the guerilla army lead by his friend blockaded a village in Bucaramanga to put pressure on the government to meet their demands, Jesualdo, on his own initiative, stepped in to speak to his friend. He negotiated to allow food and medicine to pass through. Following this, Jesualdo started an organization, 'conclutrua ciudadana' which gives talks youth from the Bucaramanga region on the impact that war has on society, and the alternative options that are open to them, so that if the youths do decide to join the guerillas, they are making an informed decision about the impact of their actions.

These are examples of how youth have played a role in peacebuilding and conflict transformation, and have succeeded in influencing others to embrace the culture of peace. Yet despite such achievements, many youth still remain distrusted. The Colombian government is now watching Jesualdo, because, having had direct contact with a guerilla leader, they do not trust him.

## *Youth Advocacy Team*

My final example is the work of the Youth Advocacy Team for a Culture of Peace.

As I've previously mentioned, we are currently in the international Decade for the Culture of Peace and Nonviolence. For this decade, a programme of action was introduced, however it was largely ignored by member states and institutions of the United Nations. For many in Civil Society, this was unacceptable. Therefore for the 2005 Mid-Decade review at the 60<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the United Nations, Fundacion Cultura de Paz together with the help of UNOY Peacebuilders, compiled a report of the initiatives of civil society to build a culture of peace, to contrast the short list of initiatives taken by the untied nations, and member states. In fact, included in this report were some of the initiatives that the Soroptimists, as part of civil society, had taken to further the Culture of Peace.

This report however, coming from civil society, was largely ignored. So a team of 7 youths got together and went to New York to lobby the countries represented at the United Nations to recognize this report and the impact that civil society have had in building a culture of peace.

Following the lobbying efforts of the Youth Advocacy Team, the number of countries that signed the resolution for the Culture of Peace rose from 66 in 2004 to 104 signatories in 2005. An amendment drafted by the youth was accepted, and the Secretary General of the United Nations was asked for the first time by the General Assembly to explore enhancing mechanisms for the implementation of the programme of action for the culture of peace, including examining cooperation with Civil Society.

In three weeks from now, an expanded team of 12 youths from diverse backgrounds and experiences, will be returning to New York for the 61<sup>st</sup> Session of the General Assembly, to lobby for increased commitment to the decade and the strengthening of the implementation of the programme of action. In addition, they will be lobbying for a Global Youth Fund to financially support the initiatives of youth for the Culture of Peace.

I hope with these examples, I have demonstrated the enormous potential that youth have in making a change, and how their contributions to peacebuilding should not be dismissed.

I was told that there would be some youth in the audience, but they are no longer able to be here, so I would like to ask you to pass on a message I have for them, which is:

*If you allow yourself to doubt your potential, and be lead to believe that others are more capable than you in making a difference, the impact of the difference you could make, would be incomparably insignificant to the difference you would be making when you have full confidence in yourself and what you are doing.*

Likewise, I would like to say to all of you from the Soroptimist who are working for the advancement of women, never let your cause be dismissed and ignored. Women, like youth, as I am sure you can tell me, have an important role to play in peacebuilding.

The more important point that I would like to stress however, is that the women's and youth peacebuilding movement should not allow each other's cause be neglected. Both have many strengths to offer each other, and the concept of cooperation is something that mathematics has still failed to grasp. Where there is cooperation,  $1 + 1$ , actually adds up to 3.

And the Soroptimists, I am pleased to say, have been excellent at supporting the youth peacebuilding movement. It was your support for, and cooperation with, the youth peacebuilding movement, that enabled the youth to achieve this 3 that I speak about.

An occasion that I can make reference to, goes back to the example of the Youth Advocacy Team. One of the biggest problems that the youth peacebuilding movement faces is financial neglect. In part, this is due to youth initiatives not being taken seriously. But also, and perhaps the greater reason, is that the youth are still young and still struggling to make their way into the world.

Therefore while we are willing to put in our time and energy, we do not have the money that will enable us to carry out our work. Recognizing precisely this, the Soroptimists last year fundraised for the Youth Advocacy Team, enabling two young females to participate in the team. Thus without your generous assistance to our cause, it would have been far more difficult to get the support that we did for the General Assembly resolution on the Culture of Peace, which had increased from 66 to 104 signatories. Furthermore, the efforts of civil society in building a culture of peace, would not have been recognized, nor would the United Nations have realized the need to work with Civil Society to implement to Programme of Action for the Culture of Peace.

So from us at UNOY Peacebuilders, I would like to say, thank you. Thank you for being so supportive of our work, and thank you for the work that you are doing for the other neglected group in society women, in advancing their cause.

Finally I'd like to finish with something that my Chinese grandmother says to me, when we are faced with the obstacles to our cause: "the more you sweat in peacetime, the less you bleed in battle".