

## “Commemorating the International Day of Families: The Contribution of the Family to Peacebuilding and Human Rights”

In the 6<sup>th</sup> event in an ongoing “peace building and human rights” conference series, the Geneva Interfaith Intercultural Alliance (GIIA) together with the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) and Women’s Federation for World Peace International (WFWPI), convened two sessions at the United Nations in Geneva on May 15 to mark the International Day of Families. Reinforcing the United Nation’s declared theme for the year 2009, “Mothers and Families: Challenges in a Changing World”, the pivotal role of the mother in the family, and the family in the community, took the stage in both session.



Chair, Dr. Alpha Ayande , Director of Synergy and Development, introduced the theme of family in its current social context. Afton Beutler, chair of the CONGO Committee on the Status of Women (CSW) Working Group on “Health and Human Rights” provided participants with examples of the primordial role that women have played in development issues. She noted however, some of the gaps that governments could help to fill in the areas of coordination and training.



Sonia Billard-Fattah, Coordinator for women's issues and online education at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), covered the very practical aspects of mothers as peacebuilders in their roles as "caregivers, educators and models" in their communities. She too, cited several best practices in the capacity that women can have to extend their "maternal embrace" beyond their own siblings to harness the strengths of community initiatives. She spoke of the very constructive power of intergenerational harmony –and specifically how her own father's "interfaith lifestyle" influenced her choices.

Michel Reymond, UPF Geneva Director, presented a more theoretical perspective concerning the roles of parents and family members in learning to live in peace, citing requirements for each developmental stage. Responding to the rather positive views presented, the Dr. Christiane Agboton Johnson, Deputy Director of UNIDIR, reminded the participants of the other side, the destructive role that the family can hold in cases of some human rights violations like FGM or honor crimes. As the sobering challenge was meant to do, it underlined another common thread of the previous speakers' statements- prioritizing access to education- including values-based education. It was noted that celebration of this day each year is meant to be a time to create greater awareness about the current situation that families face, and how the UN, governments and civil society organizations can contribute to ameliorating the situation?



In the second session, four of twelve delegates of the GIA's Youth Interfaith Council prepared statements on the family. Dorcas Pimizi (Christian), Marwa Mahmoud (Moslem), Jasdeep Singh (Sikh) and Nina Habermacher (Baha'i) were introduced by the youth coordinator and WFWPI, Deputy Director of the UN Office, Carolyn Handschin, When each of the representatives read their text, they showed a not so surprising similarity in their analysis of the role of the family in today's society as a much needed stabilizing, strengthening and educative force. "As all major religions recognize", one delegate read, "when there is no distinction between our physical family and the neighborhood family around us, we will already be living in a culture of peace". She reminded us that "religions teach those tools.

They concluded with a “Youth Interfaith Council Resolution on the Family” that highlighted the common contribution that religion can make to the family – and that families can have in the healing of our communities. It began “As the Youth Interfaith Council, we feel as one family. We have learned that mutual respect can create unity within families and among cultures and religions. Family needs a common moral and spiritual support to achieve unity within... Priority for education for women will contribute to the achievement of equality of men and women. The concept of family values is the only way to create a lasting peace and prosperity... In a family, each member is unique and each assists in the others whole development. It implies that each has a different character with weaknesses and strengths, but are all called to progress together. Therefore, religion can be a supporting factor in guiding the family to realize the equality of its members, help them to work towards being an example in society, and to form a vital and strong base for a strong society to be built on.”



By Carolyn Handschin – UPF Office Geneva