

Delivered

International Day of Women in Diplomacy 2023 Forum

Women in Diplomacy: A Spectrum of Opportunities

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Hilton Kuala Lumpur

30-minute keynote address

Assalamualaikum and good afternoon

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Excellencies, distinguished guests, esteemed panelists, ladies and gentlemen.

It is an honour to be here today and deliver this keynote address in celebration of the International Day of Women in Diplomacy, and only the second year too since its first introduction on 20 June 2022. This day provides us with the opportunity to honour the extraordinary contributions of women in shaping the world's diplomatic landscape, and for us to continue collective efforts to continue to increase women's participation in diplomacy. Throughout my career managing disasters and conflicts, women have consistently demonstrated resilience, empathy, and an unwavering commitment to humanitarian principles. Frankly, while I am thankful of the progress that we as a society have made so far, I also find it jarring that it has taken us this long to appreciate the women in this sector and in leadership positions, in general and that some of those who debate women's participation seem to be stuck in an era that the rest of the world has moved on from long ago.

In fact, maybe jarring is the wrong word. I find it offensive, shocking and morally revolting that gender diversity is still, after so many decades of advancement, still seen as a debate by some. While we are moving in the right direction we're nowhere near parity. The 2023 Women in Diplomacy Index shows that only 21 percent of ambassadors worldwide are women, and in Asia, only 12 percent! In Malaysia, the share of women ambassadors and permanent representatives is even regressing. We are now at 12 percent in 2023, compared to 19 percent in 2021.¹ The global numbers are even lower in conflict-affected areas, clearly at odds with evidence that shows that when women hold senior decision-making positions, the risk of instability through conflict is reduced

¹ <https://www.agda.ac.ae/docs/default-source/default-document-library/women-diplomacy.pdf?sfvrsn=0#:~:text=The%20Index%20found%20that%20in,underrepresented%20in%20top%20diplomatic%20posts.&text=Our%20data%20found%20that%20Europe,permanent%20representatives%2C%20at%2028%25>.

significantly. Global diplomacy is missing out from charting out effective and sustainable pathways to peace and security through greater women's participation.

Pardon me for being frank but this is just unacceptable. In my journey through many career paths, I have met so many amazing women among them diplomats. Diplomacy at its core too is the art of building bridges, forging connections, and pursuing mutual understanding against a complex backdrop of risks and possibilities – skills that are more naturally common among women. Yet, I often ask where are the women diplomats in the region? We know that ASEAN for example still has pockets of violence and conflict where the WPS agenda is still highly relevant and needs to step up. We need not look too far to our neighbours and while insufficient action has been taken to some of what one might even classify as genocidal activities in our back yard, the tools we have for WPS have not been wielded enough, insufficient national action plans have been developed and we can no longer afford to turn a blind eye on the atrocities in the region.

We often hear stories and studies highlighting the career-family conflict behind the gender gap in industries, but I'd like to highlight one interesting underlying tendency among women that also applies in the diplomatic arena. Ironically, women – despite how good they are at nurturing relationships and building bridges – tend to struggle at networking, an expectation that comes with diplomatic work. As studies apparently show, there is a tendency for women to hesitate pursuing 'business friendships' out of 'morality', feeling uncomfortable and inauthentic when doing so.² When you think about it, this is really quite noble – preferring genuine friendships rather than just mere business transactions, but we cannot keep allowing this hesitation to limit our own personal and professional growth.

So let me challenge this idea. In my many years since my time with MERCY Malaysia to my days in the United Nations, I have made many friendships that may have started from work but are certainly lifelong. It is a matter of perspective, of listening with intent to understand, and willingness to connect to people at the human level and seeing people beyond simple business transactions. Perhaps at work, we tend to forget that the other person sitting across the table is just as human as we are. As an ObGyn by training, I am reminded that the first organ to develop in the fetus is the heart followed by the spinal cord and neural system and then the brain. Yet, after birth, from home to school to work, the focus immediately goes to developing the brain while the heart often takes the backseat. Maybe this explains the problems we have in society globally today. But in diplomacy, we need just as much heart as we need the brain.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Throughout my career as a humanitarian, I have been quite actively involved in supporting the UN Security Council's Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda (Resolution 1325), first adopted on 31 October 2000. The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace

2

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328949789_Why_women_build_less_effective_networks_than_men_The_role_of_structural_exclusion_and_personal_hesitation?_cf_chl_tk=QSE7pc6V01Ad20gKDX.3G5oiQCQAC86RRxY6rvun_w-1687346584-0-gaNycGzNDRA

negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response, and post-conflict reconstruction. It stresses the importance of equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.

Over the years, we have seen how women have played a vital role in peace and security. I remember meeting Leymah Gbowee in Malaysia at a conference. Listening to her struggles in Liberia and how she and her colleagues worked to gather the “market women” both Christian and Muslim, to take turns to cast their votes and take care of each other’s goods while one group went to the polling station, is a humbling story of how women supported democracy, made their voices heard and removed a despot from power. If you have not watched it yet, please look for a copy of the film “Pray the devil back to hell” – it is uplifting. Not long after our meeting, the Nobel Peace Prize was conferred to Leymah and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

And when it comes to post-conflict reconstruction – that is heavily needed now in so many places around the planet – women are known to prioritise recovery of communities. I remember one particularly horrific experience I had was having to travel to the Democratic Republic of the Congo after a weekend of mass rape of more than 500 women and girls, some barely a year old. This happened just a year after another important security resolution linked to SC 1325 was passed, that is SC 1820 in 2009 on sexual violence as a weapon of war. Yet, when we sat down with these women, with other parts of the United Nations, to seek justice – women wanted reparation. They wanted peace. The people who raped them were partners of their neighbours and women they knew. All they asked for was for health treatment and for schools and community and livelihood centres to be built. Life had to go on. I was honestly stunned by their courage. How could a mother, wife, daughter who had gone through so much suffering be so courageous and forgiving? This is precisely the strength of women, who put the recovery of their community above themselves. Yet, the systems and protection mechanisms that we put in place do not protect the very people that protect us and our communities.

There are many other stories I could tell from my experience on the ground. From facilitating access of international humanitarian assistance to disaster affected and conflict affected countries in the continent, when barriers to multilateral assistance were put up by regimes – through employing quiet diplomacy, compassion and feminist leadership – listening, calling for dialogue, communicating at a human level with even the most hardline leaders – all have borne results. But we shall reserve these stories for long coffee sessions when we have more time.

While the Women in Diplomacy index is measured by the number of women ambassadors and permanent representatives present in a country, diplomacy doesn’t just begin and end in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Diplomacy is about building trust and a mutual understanding, and that can take place anywhere, but it may take time and certainly relies on the traits that I have mentioned earlier – humility and the willingness to listen, understand, and connect.

Working at the IFRC for more than four years, the largest and oldest humanitarian network, between 2016-2021, we managed numerous health crises at national, regional and global levels, including the on-going

COVID crisis. In the Ebola pandemics in West Africa in 2015 and subsequently in the DRC, it was community-led participation and interventions that led to the end of the spread of disease. Volunteers working on the ground conducting safe and dignified burials of victims prevented further spread and an estimate puts about 10,000 deaths prevented as a direct result of this action. As a woman humanitarian, it was much easier to gain access to homes and families, to have conversations with women and their sometimes-scary partners, and to negotiate for not only better health access for women and girls, but also for livelihoods.

So, we need to acknowledge and recognise that in addition to the skills that we learn we also have inherent features attached to our gender which provide us with a comparative advantage in working with women, and we need to understand that, oftentimes, it's women who get things done, it's women who lead change; it's women who are the backbones of their communities and the fabric of societies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are living in an age of an emerging uncertainty complex, where effective diplomacy is so critically needed. The latest UNDP Human Development Report outlined that on top of everyday uncertainties, we now face a dangerous planetary change affecting our very survival, sweeping social transformations, and rising political polarisation. All of these pose major threats to mankind's peace and security. So, the WPS agenda is now increasingly relevant in not only the traditional security challenges of military and armed conflicts, but also non-traditional and emerging threats such as pandemics and other health crises, and, of course, climate change. In many countries, women are pushed more out of employment and into unpaid care and domestic work, influenced by existing gender roles in societies. In developing economies like ours, about 70 percent of women work in the informal economy where social protection mechanisms are difficult to access.³ In Pacific Island countries, women were slower and less likely to receive the first two doses of COVID-19 vaccines due to administrative delays and responsibilities at home that restrained them from going to the vaccine facilities.⁴ To be honest with you, I get tired of saying it but the bottom line is that our societies have still not advanced enough and socioeconomic inequalities are still rife. Women get the short end of the stick in times of crisis. When crises hit women are often disproportionately negatively impacted.

So, today is a day for celebration but also must serve as a moment to remind us all how much more work must be done. Two things are urgently needed:

Firstly, we must fully acknowledge our rapidly changing security landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the need to re-examine security to include the political, economic, and sociocultural dimensions and the interconnectedness of these dimensions. These have been quite clearly expressed in ASEAN's Regional Plan of

³ <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Policy-Brief-on-COVID-Impact-on-Women.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/802341/lingering-gendered-effects-covid19-asia-pacific.pdf>

Action on Women, Peace, and Security (RPA WPS) that was introduced late last year.⁵ Through a multi-stakeholder consultative process, the plan fully recognises and is designed to address the overlapping, intersecting, and emerging threats to peace and security including climate change, disasters, and pandemics. Translating this commitment into implementation at regional and country levels is now the challenge, and that must begin by creating spaces for greater women participation in peace and security and fostering a constructive engagement and dialogue with civil society at all levels. This should also include more collaborations and partnerships between multi-sectoral groups on key issues such as community-based disaster risk reduction, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. Plans are all very well but if they are not implemented then we're getting nowhere fast.

Secondly, leadership – from women mentoring and sponsoring more women in the field, supporting promotions to higher ranks and leadership positions,

But let me reserve my final thoughts for the men in the room, for the men outside the room and especially for the men who think that gender equality remains an issue for debate. We have come a long way and, in that journey, have been supported by men; men of vision, men who questioned the status quo, men who were willing to concede power, men who “get it”. But we cannot stop here. Women and men must work together to address gender driven social inequalities at all levels of our society – not only because it's fair to do so but because equal participation of men and women in communities, policy, politics and society means that our planet will be a better place to live. It's really that simple.

So, to our Foreign Ministry, and our diplomatic community may I respectfully ask that you work actively, through clear policies, to equalise female participation in our diplomatic service. I will personally champion this in my role as a member of the advisory group to MFA Malaysia and we need to build a cadre of women diplomats at all levels. By so doing we will ensure that Malaysia shines on the international stage.

Thank you

⁵ <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/32-ASEAN-Regional-Plan-of-Action-on-Women-Peace-and-Security.pdf>
