

The Pax Christi International UN NGO Team: WOMEN AND PEACE ADVOCACY

Mary T. Yelenick Webinar Presentation for Pax Christi England and Wales, March 8, 2021

Thank you to Pax Christi England and Wales for inviting me to participate in this International Women's Day conversation, as a member of the Pax Christi International NGO Team at the United Nations in New York.

For those unfamiliar with the acronym, "NGO" – a term set forth in the 1945 UN Charter itself – simply means "Non-Governmental Organization:" an organization formed by citizens, rather than by a government. NGOs play a critical role at the UN in educating State members about the realities of people's experiences around the world, and in advocating for the adoption of policies to redress inequities, reduce suffering, and advance the common good.

I. The Backdrop for Pax Christi's Advocacy at the United Nations

Pax Christi was created 75 years ago, in response to the violence of our world. Pax Christi represented then – and now – an alternative to that violence.

Our Pax Christi International United Nations NGO team in New York focuses our Advocacy efforts on Nonviolence, as well as on three (3) specific Advocacy Priorities targeted by Pax Christi. These three Advocacy Priorities involve specific areas of human activity that entail deep historic and recurring violence:

- **Nuclear Weapons**, whose testing and use have caused the horrific deaths of hundreds of thousands of people – primarily People of Color – as a result of the US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as through nuclear testing in the South Pacific, Kazakhstan, the American Southwest, and other places in the world. Nuclear weapons have also produced radiation-induced cancers and genetic abnormalities, still being passed down, through generations – as well as the poisoning and scarring of lands and waters, in perpetuity. Nuclear weapons continue to consign to death – by hunger,

poverty, lack of clean water, and untreated disease – millions more of the world's people, through the diversion of trillions of dollars globally to build and maintain the nuclear death arsenal.

- **Global Mining and Extraction**, industrial processes that often entail the violent displacement of local communities; the contamination and poisoning of the lands and waters of those communities; high levels of rape and other violence committed against women in those communities; and violent murders and repression of community activists (such as Berta Caceres), committed brazenly and largely with impunity.
- **Israel-Palestine**: Addressing the violence of mass displacement, expulsion, confinement, and theft; the widespread seizure of lands and bodies; and the multitude of daily practices and policies defining and marginalizing certain communities of people as “The Other.”

Our Purpose as members of the Pax Christi NGO Team at the UN is to learn, understand, and influence the policies of UN Member States in order to advance the promotion and practice of global nonviolence. And in order to do that, our UN team engages actively in Advocacy.

II. What Does “Advocacy” Entail?

Many of us may instinctively identify Advocacy as the use of one's Voice – effectively using that voice to articulate a position, seeking to achieve a particular outcome.

But Advocacy actually relies – at base – on something other than one's voice: it relies – instead – on one's *ears*.

Advocacy requires *listening*.

For in order to articulate or explain another's position, I first need to deeply understand that person's position. And that can only be done by my first listening – deeply – to that person.

Advocacy entails having people tell you their stories.

Better yet, Advocacy means using your connections and access to help find a platform for people – who lack those connections and access – to tell their *own* stories.

Our UN Team has sought to do that, in a number of ways:

- At briefings of UN Member States
- In off-the-record meetings with Members of the Security Council
- In informal conversations with the Staff of a UN Mission
- In letters to UN Missions from global Pax Christi members – letters that the UN team can help draft or deliver
- In meetings with other NGOs
- At “Side Events” at the UN, sponsored by Pax Christi, at which we, and others, make formal presentations
- And in online discussions, like this one, with members of Pax Christi and others interested in global issues

These are different ways of sharing others’ realities, with Policymakers.

How does one get into a position to be able to *listen* – to be privy to another’s reality? You first need to be in *Relationship* with that person. And that requires building mutual trust. It requires setting aside your own presuppositions – and embracing a willingness to modify, or even discard, your own views, based upon another’s reality .

Advocacy is, at base, all about these Relationships.

And, for that reason, *women* are particularly well suited to be effective advocates.

III. Women are Particularly Adept at Being in Relationship With, and in Listening To, Others

There is a lot of scholarship – and I suspect that most on this call would recognize, from their own personal experiences – that women may be generally better than are most men at forming and maintaining deep and sustained personal relationships with others.

This may or may not be a function of biology, but of culture. It is more expected, and more permitted, in many cultures, for a woman to build close relational ties with not only members of her immediate family, but with the larger neighborhood, village, or community. And this gives these women access, knowledge, and understanding about the nature, realities, and needs of that larger community.

Women straddle multiple spheres – exercising daily responsibilities, having close interactions, and engaging in relationship-building, with people from a broad array of ages and backgrounds. Women are often the designated caregivers – and the teachers – in a society. And that “care” and “teaching” frequently extend beyond narrow family lines. This puts women in a position to be able to observe, listen to, and learn from, a variety and range of voices and viewpoints.

This also means that women may have the opportunity to gain deeper and more lasting insights into the realities of – and, importantly, the early warning signs imperiling – the larger community: what problems exist in the community; what fissures and fractures may be eroding the bonds within that community; and what members of the community might be longing for, and need, in order to achieve and maintain stability.

Finally, because of women’s own experiences – including those of bias and exclusion – women may be able to recognize intersectionalities that men would never experience, nor indeed even see.

IV. Women Are Not Only Critical Agents of Identifying Community Problems – But Also of Advocating for, and Devising, Solutions to Those Problems

We're probably all familiar with the results of research demonstrating that peace processes – and the resilience and longevity of peace resolutions – are more comprehensive and inclusive; last significantly longer; and are more durable, to the extent that *women* have been integrally involved in that peace process. (Our sisters from Pax Christi Philippines, for example, have very valuable knowledge, experience, and insights into that reality.)

The importance of the involvement of women in conflict resolution relates to the factors that we have already discussed: women are frequently more connected with a wider variety of voices within the community – including those of the elderly, youth, and the outcast and marginalized – and so are in a better position to learn, share, and incorporate the interests of that broader cross-section of society, in creating peaceful conditions.

And the more people in the community whose interests, experiences, and realities are represented, articulated, reflected, and protected in a peace agreement, the wider commitment and “buy-in” there is, by the community at large – and so the greater likelihood that the resulting peace accord will be accepted, and honored.

V. In Closing

I want to share an example that crystallizes, for me, the purpose and the potential of our Pax Christi Advocacy – not only at the UN, or by the formal NGO Team, but by anyone and everyone on this call today.

Last year, Pax Christi hosted a remarkable global webinar, moderated by Martha Ines Romero (the Latin-American Coordinator for Pax Christi International). The webinar presenters included people from across Latin America, sharing the multitude of challenges they confronted; the setbacks – and victories – they had experienced; and the variety of strategies

they employed in trying to keep their local communities safe. The speakers shared their heartbreaks, and the enormous physical and psychological challenges they confront daily.

One of the speakers was a woman named Yolanda (or “Yola”), from the highlands of Peru – where local people are bravely resisting a host of deadly and destructive practices by global mining companies, including the contamination of local water sources by arsenic poisoning.

At the end of the panel’s spirited, raw, and in-depth exchange – with a lot of mutual commiseration and strategizing. . . Yola rose up, and raised her voice, powerfully – her eyes shining and her face radiant – and exclaimed, marveling – in a combination of revelation and disbelief: “We are not alone!!” “*WE ARE NOT ALONE.*”

Yola had realized that she and her community, though being tucked far away in a remote region of Peru, were *not* laboring in isolation, unheard, or unwitnessed. She knew that her story had been told, and listened to, and honored, and that there were many people, across the region and around the world, who recognized the importance and righteousness of her cause – and were committed to support and witness to her community’s struggle.

And that feeling of solidarity with others – with the recognition that her community was not suffering in isolation, but was connected to others in a larger movement of pushing back against oppressive structures of violence – and the recognition that her own, and her own community’s, voices had been solicited, welcomed, listened to, and honored, made a real difference.

Our work as Advocates – and this applies not only to our Pax Christi UN NGO Team, but to everyone on this call (all of whom, I suspect, are already Advocates) – is to *listen*. And to learn. And to share. And to work, hand in hand – with those to whom we have listened: with the goal that there will come a day when ALL people, around the world, will be able to know, and proclaim, confidently, that “*WE ARE NOT ALONE.*”