

WFWPI UN Geneva Forum Stresses Women’s Role in Peacemaking

Mara Probst and Mariia Anapreichyk
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Geneva, Switzerland – The conference “No Peace without Women: No More War – Can We?” featured two distinguished panels of UN officials, government representatives, journalists, and civil society leaders, who highlighted the indispensable role of women and faith-based actors in peacebuilding and the prevention of war. The program was co-organized by the Women’s Federation for World Peace International (WFWPI) and the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), and held in the Palais des Nations in Geneva on October 16, 2025.



Other partners were UN Women, the NGO Committee on the Status of Women Geneva, the World Council of Churches, Global 100 Women, the International Association of First Ladies for Peace, Soroptimist International, International Association of Youth and Students for Peace, LDS Charities, and

the Geneva Interfaith Intercultural Alliance.

Session I – No Peace without Women

Ms. Carolyn Handschin, director of WFWPI’s Office for UN Relations Geneva, opened the session by explaining how recent regional conflicts led to the formation of a network of women leaders under the “No Peace without Women” banner, uniting for global solidarity and shared responsibility to end war. WFWPI, the IAFLP, and UN and government partners launched conferences across Europe and the Balkans, inspiring similar initiatives elsewhere.



This conference marks the second time the movement returns to the United Nations in Geneva. Ms. Handschin highlighted the need to “create a vision and standard for peace that starts within the family,” and drew attention to the often undervalued role of mothers. She emphasized that “No peace without women” is not intended to exclude men, but is a call to prioritize and empower girls and women to be active in community building, reconciliation and restoring global order.



Ms. Kate Forbes, representing the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), highlighted the humanitarian dimension of peace. She reminded participants that climate change and armed conflict are increasingly interlinked and that women and children bear the heaviest burdens. Ms. Forbes also noted that the majority of Red Cross volunteers worldwide are women, embodying the principle that peace “is not a document, but an act of service – people standing side by side.”



Ms. Asya Varbanova, head of the Humanitarian Section at UN Women, presented alarming data on the persistent exclusion of women from peace processes. In 2023, women made up only 9.6% of negotiators, 13.7% of mediators, and 26.6% of signatories to peace agreements. Only a quarter of peace accords even mentioned gender, and none included women’s groups as signatories. She noted a doubling in the number of women killed in conflicts and a 50% rise in cases of conflict-related sexual violence. “We have the evidence, we have the frameworks, but what we lack is political will,” she stated, calling for increased funding for women’s local peace organizations and full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for greater participation by women in peace processes.

Ms. Giulia Clara Kessous, UNESCO Artist for Peace, offered a profound reflection on the art of negotiation. “Women negotiate differently,” she said, “not to win, but to ensure shared survival.” She called for a paradigm shift toward “a diplomacy of collaboration,” proposing a 40% quota for women in formal peace processes. Citing economic data, she observed that the cost of war now exceeds US\$19 trillion annually, or 13% of global GDP, making peace “not only a moral imperative but an economic necessity.” Her call to “choose life over victory” resonated deeply with the audience.

From a journalistic perspective, **Ms. Olivia Le Poidevin** of Reuters offered firsthand testimony from conflict zones, including Ukraine, Gaza, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. She recounted her experience reporting from hospitals in Lebanon after the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, quoting doctors who told her, “The longer the war goes on, the more women we will have to treat.” Ms. LePoidevin highlighted that women often bear invisible burdens as widows, heads of households, and survivors of sexual violence. Yet, she said she had witnessed that “even in the darkest moments, women do not give up – they continue to heal, rebuild, and lead.”

Ms. Patricia Elias, intergovernmental advocacy director at G100 Women, closed the first session by reminding participants that gender equality is not peripheral to peace, it is its foundation. Referring to ongoing women-led peace initiatives in Libya, she called for women’s equal participation in decision-making at all levels, urging the international community to “act for peace now” and ensure that “we do not fail women again.”

Session II – No More War: Can We?

The second session, moderated by **Mr. Heiner Handschin**, president of UPF-Switzerland, explored faith-based and educational approaches to peace. In his opening remarks he emphasized the untapped potential of a faith-based approach in peace processes. There is a need for greater inclusion of the wisdom and efforts of the world’s religions, combining them with political, economic, and social perspectives, he said.

At the outset of the conference, a message of endorsement by **Ambassador Mxolisi Nkosi** of South Africa was read. He stated that “South Africa’s own journey from oppression to freedom has taught us that peace is never the mere absence of war, but the presence of justice, dignity, and inclusion. Women were at the heart of our liberation struggle, and they remain central to our ongoing efforts to build a democratic, equitable, and peaceful society. South Africa stands firmly with all those governments, faith communities, and civil society organizations who work tirelessly to promote peace and reconciliation. We commend the Universal Peace Federation and its partners for providing a platform where diverse voices can come together in the service of humanity.”

Ms. Frédérique Seidel of the World Council of Churches (WCC) reflected on the importance of healing as a prerequisite for sustainable peace. She drew from the Council’s global work with children and communities, emphasizing that “If you want lasting peace, you must help children heal the ruins of their souls.” Citing Poland’s post-World War II recovery and Rwanda’s reconciliation process, she stressed the transformative power of education and interfaith collaboration in preventing violence and fostering resilience.



Ms. Paulette Lacroix, representative of the International Office of Catholic Education (OIEC), presented the new publication “A School for Peace - Towards a Global Educational Fraternity.” She explained that education is “a lever for reconciliation and equality,” rooted in Pope Francis’ vision of the Global Educational Pact. “Peace is built in classrooms,” she said. “Teaching is already sowing the seeds of hope.” Ms. Lacroix called for global efforts to train teachers as peacemakers and to ensure girls’ access to education, inclusion, and safety.

From a youth perspective, **Ms. Ejona Icka**, director of IAYSP’s office for UN relations, reported on the recent peacebuilding work of youth bringing political leaders together in the divided Kosovo city of Mitrovica. She urged governments and donors to dare to invest in young people. “If you don’t know what to do with your money, invest in youth,” she said, stressing the potential of intergenerational collaboration to transform conflict into cooperation enjoyably.

Mr. Stefano Bosco, director of public and international affairs of the LDS community, drew on studies linking faith, purpose, and psychological well-being, emphasizing that the foundation of peace lies in finding meaning through faith. Through a faith-based approach, starting in the nurturing environment of the family, peace can be learned, practiced and taught. Simple traditions learned and upheld in families can be a foundation and future security of peaceful and cohesive communities.

Mr. Jacques Marion, chairman of UPF-Europe and the Middle East, wrapped up the conference by emphasizing the spiritual side of peace. He said that, although the United Nations was established without a religious chamber, it is time to introduce an Interreligious Council alongside political bodies. “Religion has too often divided humanity,” he said, “but if it can divide, it can also reconcile.”



He encouraged faith communities to uphold human dignity and peace as sacred duties, echoing the conference's central message: there can be no peace without women and dialogue. He criticized recent government crackdowns on faith-based organizations, citing cases from Japan threatening the eradication of an entire faith community, and the unjust imprisonment of faith leaders in South Korea.