**PRESIDENT ADDRESS**

**EXTENDING IALRW COMMITMENT TO WOMEN ISSUES:**

**WOMEN AS PEACE BUILDERS**

These days, day by day, we witness through the media, violence and brutalities, death and killings, spread across the globe. The on-going wars and conflicts have taken millions of lives of innocent people. So many have died that the UNHR is no longer counting – children, women and men who had nothing to do with the issues of these wars and conflicts, and cause incredible hardship and misery for those who survived the attacks. We see superpowers being part of the conflicts, spurring on the carnages rather than ending the conflicts, as in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. We see sectarian fights that flared into massacres as in Yemen, Pakistan. We see innocent and poor people driven from their homes and their homelands for no other reason except that they are different from the dominant group, as in Myanmar, Congo, Rwanda, South Sudan etc. We see the ongoing killing and siege of Palestine, and the freedom fights of Kashmir and the Ukraine. We see reckless bombings upon innocent people as they go about in their daily routine as in Somalia, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, among others. We see refugees fleeing for their lives and ended dead in the seas. We see people witnessing their families slaughtered and their homes burnt down. We see women raped and tortured in front of their husbands, children and brothers.

Europe and America also are in states of nervousness as mass killings and street killings take the lives of innocent people, and even school children in the USA fear being in school. In fact, even this part of the world, the Far East, is in a state of nervousness for fear of an eruption of a nuclear war set off by the instable personalities of Heads of State. Heads of States are personalizing the authority that they are entrusted with to serve their own ego, interests and glory. The noble spirit of patriotism is misused to mistreat other nations. Insecurity, nervousness, anger, pain, suffering, death – are all around us and are impossible to ignore or not to care.

 Yet, despite this terrible state, let us not despair. Indeed, it is in the very nature of human beings that out of tragedy comes hope, and with hope comes determination to improve the situation, and with determination, we work seriously to change bad situation into good situation; from the ugly, we create beauty; from misery we can cultivate happiness; and we can change hatred into friendship, conflict into harmonious living. Yes, we can - IALRW can.

When IALRW was first initiated by a group of very brave, very noble-hearted women in 1910, it was founded within a similar background of disorder, violence and conflicts which ultimately exploded into the First World War of 1914 to 1918, and just twenty years later, the Second World War, 1939 to1945. Within a short period of twenty years, the world was thrown into terrible chaos and horrifying suffering, and all because certain people with authority and power wanted everybody to submit to them, and to live and think like them. Indeed, political conceit and extreme nationalism always resulted in appalling tragedies and gruesome cruelties, including the horrific extermination of Hiroshima. We certainly hope that the violence and conflicts that are sporadic and are mounting up now will not lead to another World War although global wars are already here, i.e., wars are taking place here and there across the globe.

The situation in 1910 would have been as similar as we are facing today, or perhaps even worse. Our IALRW members then must have gone through as terrible a period of fear, concern and pain, and so they founded and built up IALRW as a platform upon which they can come together and work together to do their part to address the situation at hand. IALRW survived the two World Wars and came out intact and active, contributing to reviving the dire human situation of that time with their high noble ideals of helping the affected and the less fortunate, particularly the women and children of their time.

In the past years IALRW had particularly focused on helping women, to help them improve themselves and establish their human rights, as well as assisting them to empower themselves through acquiring literacy, education and skills so that they could improve their lives and became respected members of society. With education and skills these women were able to contribute to their families too and not become mere dependents on their male counterparts. Today and in the future, IALRW will still continue to assist women and to attend to the particular needs of women and also of children.

Today, it is enlightening to see that there are also many women associations similarly working on the needs and issues related to women. IALRW will network and work together with these groups for our common course, namely to improve and empower women. Our work motto which reflects our name of *liberal religious women* is that - “Alone we may not be able to make it; together we stand a better chance”. Moreover, working together with people of various religions and cultures is also a process of educating ourselves and opens up the whole world to us, making our lives richer and more fulfilling.

It should be noted that although IALRW works mainly for woman needs and interests, IALRW however is not gender biased. Indeed, IALRW does have male members and is also a part of IARF (International Association for Religious Freedom) which is an association made up of both women and men and people of all nationality and religion. Indeed, like IARF, IALRW looks at situations comprehensively and objectively, without biases, and will attend to what are needed and as appropriate, to whoever; and within the capability of IALRW’s workforce and financial situation, we will come up to attend to the needs of the situation.

Unfortunately, IALRW today does not have enough workforces and nor also enough financial means to carry out as many activities as we hope to do. As such, as President of IALRW, I hereby appeal to our members not only to be dedicated to the course of IALRW but also to invite more people to join IALRW and to help find means to make more money for us so as to enable us to carry out the needed activities and to make these activities more meaningful and effective. If our founding members in the 1900s had been able to do so during such a difficult and trying time, so can we too, that is if we too think and dedicate ourselves to our course as they had done. We may not be able to do so overnight, but by and by we can, and we will thus be able to increase our membership, especially getting the younger ones to join us. With enough workforces, we can then work to improve our financial situation.

We need to have a healthy combination of senior and junior members, a combination of experience and stamina, and with a variety of ability and skills. As the seniors are respected, the juniors are appreciated, and both groups are equally loved. Likewise, we should also have sets of activities that can appeal to different age groups, activities and programs designated not only for the age group’s interest but also such that the group will be able to contribute comfortably and effectively. Thus, IALRW needs to diversify our approaches and broaden our activities, to add on to our regular interests and activities that we already have been doing, to become more broad-based and more accommodative to new talents and skills. The world is changing very fast and if we do not fit into the developments and changes, then IALRW will be out of context to the realities around us, and consequently IALRW may no longer be relevant, let alone be significant, to the world today.

Indeed, the world today has moved away from the world of our founding members. The urgent focus of IARF then was fighting for the rights for religious freedom, and IALRW extended that focus to include women who were religious yet at the same time liberal in their outlook, who were willing, able, comfortable and happy to work together with all religious communities and religious adherents. Unlike those days, today, working together with people of all religious affiliations is the rule rather than the exception. And indeed, except for isolated cases where religious intolerance still predominates, in general however, people are not only free to choose to profess their religion, faith or beliefs, but even not to have any religion too.

Likewise, values have also changed, and not all the changes are for the better. In fact, it is so ironic that today where education is the highest ever in human history and technology has brought tremendous improvement to human lives, yet people in general have not improved much as human beings. Indeed, the ugliest side of humanity is not only present today but is also spreading ever so fast. People are becoming more and more individualistic, selfish and egoistic. Personal success is the goal today and this inevitably leads to a social order of intense competitiveness, which inevitably leads to selfishness, greed, arrogance and egoism, reducing human beings to creatures of the physical, of the appetite, wanting more and more, at whatever the course may be, disregarding other people’s well being.

Thus, greed, exploitation, and oppression have become part of the social order, and the tough and arrogant are taken as role models for success. Dignity, decency, compassion and chivalry have diminished, fading away into oblivion. Life has become mere existence, embedded in superficialities and appearances, devoid of depth and noble ideals. Everything today is about the individual, and the individual success. And yet these successful individuals are finding themselves getting more and more lost and entangled in the social fabric of confusion and pretences, becoming more and more lonely despite being among people, and feeling more and more impoverished despite surrounded by prosperity. It is not difficult to see that this type of social order will not lead to a comfortable, let alone a happy social life; hence the addictions, suicides, violence and rampages.

Yes, we are living in a very challenging period indeed. On one hand are the physical deaths and destructions by the wars and violence, massacres and killings. On the other hand is the death of the human spirit, resulting in human-less humans. Even so, let us however not despair. Every bad dream will end when we wake up. With every bad person, there are many more good ones; with every scoundrel, there are also many saints; with greed there is also generosity; and with every cruelty, there is also compassion. Indeed, such miseries as these are not new in human history. Throughout the Ages, similar situations prevailed, and in fact, it is during the lowest period of human misconduct that prophets, sages, saints, religious leaders and founders of religion appeared to bring humans back to becoming proper human beings again.

Please don’t get me wrong - I am not saying that prophets and founders of religion will now appear again – no, this is not what I mean, not at all. What I mean to imply by this reference to the time of the prophets and the founders of religion is that I am certain there will be among us today those individuals who are enlightened enough to bring us back to our senses again and help us to become the human beings that we ought to be – compassionate, chivalrous, dignified, decent. Even more than this I am saying that we all can be part of bringing back this human dignity into this world again. So let us start by preparing ourselves for the noble role of becoming social and peace builders, of ushering back peace, compassion, chivalry, dignity and decency to the world again. Let us feel comfortable and happy in doing so and let us assist others to be as happy and comfortable to be so too.

Yes, we simple women can push ourselves to do big things not because we want to be great but because this is part of our responsibility as a member of the human race. Let us not forget that we are here as we are now because in our lives there were people who made it possible for us to be and to become what we are now. It is only proper that we too now make it possible for others to have the chance to become like us, or even better than what we are now. And indeed we can do so. In fact not only can we do so but that we can do so as we are, in our own ways, as how we know and how we can. We don’t have to become someone else, to become someone great in order to contribute good to humanity.

Everyone can do so in her or his own capacity. Indeed, no one is so humble as to be irrelevant and no good deed is ever redundant. Each and everyone is a special person in her and his own way, and are therefore great in her and his own way. What we need to do is to care and to help those around us, to be friends to those around us, to help others to be comfortable and happy. We start with those nearest and dearest to us and expand our circle of “the nearest and dearest”, gradually including everyone into our circles of care and compassion. This is the simplest and yet it is the most noble of IALRW’s mission, namely to be inclusive, to bring everybody into our circles of nearest and dearest, and to spread compassion, chivalry, dignity and decency.

May we succeed.

Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman

President of IALRW,

Tokyo, Japan

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