

**IFUW 31<sup>st</sup> Triennial Conference, Istanbul  
Opening Ceremony Speech, by Safak Pavey  
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Distinguished IFUW members, excellent organizers and esteemed participants,

I would like to warmly salute and welcome you all in our hometown Istanbul and wish you a wonderful IFUW 31<sup>st</sup> Triennial Conference.

I would like to start by looking at what we have been talking about as a society recently. Last week, we have been talking whether pregnant women should be out on the streets, how virtuous or against moral values this would be.

This week we had the topic of whether young women, teenagers should be wearing shorts. Mixed-gender university dormitories have been on our government's list of priorities for most serious problems since a long time. The made-up perception that female and male university students would actually be sharing the same bed at the mixed-gender dormitories have been established in the public opinion with a very attentive propaganda.

In the past month, 17 mixed-university dormitories, which already have separate buildings as a common practice all across, have actually been separated by campus. For instance, in Bursa Uludag University, male students now have to stay in a dorm in the city centre as their dorm at the campus has been closed as part of this policy to separate the dorm locations for women and men.

The students who stay at the state university dormitories are already those who are struggling to make ends meet. And yet, these students are very worried about how they will be able to complete their education while they have to pay extra 5 USD (10 TL) a day for their transportation from city centre to the campus and back.

Yet, I recall the famous verses of our renowned poet Nazim Hikmet with a sad tingling within me: "**I am ahead of my father**, behind my unborn child".

I hope to be mistaken but I think nowadays, our girls are born into a more backward life standard than their mothers. Where we were and where we have come to? It is unbelievable..!

Last year, I had submitted a parliamentary question about the separation of Kadirga and Edirnekapi mixed student dorms. I would be embarrassed to tell you the volume and contents of the insults, threats and indecent proposals that I have been receiving since posing this question before the parliament to be inquired. I accept these immoral attacks that is deemed suitable and deserving for those of us who do not think like those who separate the dorms with concerns for morality, as a self-projecting mirror image of the picture they are in.

However, when we look at the century we are in as a whole, we see that closed societies do not actually fight against the immoral crimes that are hurtful to human dignity such as incest, rape... they don't even include them in the statistics of the country.

Therefore, separating the gender and controlling the virtues of the society over women's behaviour, cannot be a remedy to the justification that is being presented. We can find thousands of tragic human stories to tell us about this fatal mistake across the world.

In societies where women and men are separated, there is no end to poverty, violence and sorrow. Turkey is a country that tried to distance itself from these kinds of societies by great cultural transformations and is a country that spent a lot of effort to strengthen its women. Now, we see that these efforts are trying to be destroyed by a very big and systematic work against it.

There are great efforts and particular emphasis put on defusing tensions between the Islamic and Western worlds at different platforms. However, in the meantime, the only unique model of last generation of seculars may end with us, culturally speaking. Other less powerful examples such as Algeria, Egypt, Pakistan and Iran had lost this synthesis a long time ago.

For now, nobody seems to have the courage to look at this worrying situation. And those who have the courage to attempt to deal with this are being intimidated with horrifying arguments such as destroying public morality. **Surely, at the background of it lies the discrimination that tradition finds suited for the second gender.**

**In its shortest definition, a society can only be civilised if it provides its women and girls equal participation.  
Our test paper is as short and simple as this...!**

The freedom standards for societies are parallel to women's visibility, and equal, healthy, open communication with the other gender. Often the solution for this is seen through education. Here, while I know the great value of the education, I also believe that the benefits of education can easily be eliminated by cultural pressure.

**Equal existence of woman is only possible if that society has the cultural codes to accept her leadership. Before all other conditions, the culture has to accept a woman's freedom as an ordinary thing. I believe the reason that we can not get out of the impasse that we are in, is because of the cliff between the traditionalist legends and the reality of the street.**

In my culture, it is believed that women had no value before Islam. The female who is recognised to be the first doctor is Italian medical professor Dorotea Bocchi who lived by the end of 1300s. Whereas the first Yemeni female doctor was Zeynep Spayazil who graduated from an Egyptian university in 1969. However, don't you think that the need to have a female doctor should have been met much earlier in the Islamic World where women are not allowed to be examined by male doctors. By pure logic, this should not have put into place 500 years after the West?

In general, it is believed that poverty is the cause that obstructs equal distribution of wealth for both genders. But this legend also collapses with the World Bank reports which places Mozambique, - which is one of the poorest countries in the World, as the first country in the ranking of equal opportunities for women and men.

In the same report, Qatar, - which is one of the richest countries in the World with its 130thousand US dollars income per capita, is the 115th country when it comes to equal opportunities for women. **Isn't this a sign to show us that things are not going in the right direction?**

Additionally as a small note, I would like to add that the literacy rate of girls in Japan was %98 in the year 1871. I would not even like to mention the same times for girls in the Ottoman Empire.

**I believe when we start talking courageously about the differences between legends and reality, we will take the first real social step towards joining the modern society.**

According to tradition that is rooted in the feudal worldview, it is a right for the authority to control woman's behaviour. For this reason, the moral police known as Mutaawin in the Arab countries and Basij in Iran controls women's behaviour, whether they wear their chador or abaya properly or have improper relations with men. Woman's permission to travel is left to the husband and in some countries; you can only travel if accompanied by a male relative.

**You can't ride a bicycle. Woman's voice is a sin at places of men and same goes for woman singing.** At Sharia courts, one man's testimony is equal to two women's. It is not allowed to use public transportation that belongs to men. At King Saud University in Riyadh, male professors can only lecture to female students from outside the room that they are in.

According to the UN statistics, %11,4 of average parliamentary representation of women in other parts of the World drops down to only a %3,4 average in Arab parliaments. %55 of Arab women are illiterate.

Women are monitored through sexuality in those traditionalist societies. **If you do not change the dominating culture of "chastity" perception imposed upon majority of women in the society, then you cannot create "strong female role models" with a handful of successful women on the top. And the cliff gets so widened that the majority gets wrapped up with values that are unknown to the minority and it becomes a threat to modern life, leaving aside developing or progressing in any sense.**

**It creates two stranger communities that look at each other with hate from two sides of the cliff. This is the reality in Turkey today.**

In the 21st century, "respect for human rights" turned into a common value amongst the States and became a condition to be part of the international community despite a lot of challenges faced at national implementation level.

In the past 20 years, the developments and changes in in the international community strengthened multilateral human rights actors and procedures. Many countries have integrated human rights into their foreign affairs agendas. Civil society took a more important role in the political picture.

**However, our journey is not over yet.**

**Speaking as a lawmaker, I can see a much stronger challenge than changing laws in compliance with the international law. That is the resistance of traditions.**

I am very often faced with the underlying thought, deeply embedded in various societies that questions fundamental freedoms, saying; “instead of freedoms that does not contribute with a meaning to my life, I choose traditions that give meaning to one's life”.

In the past years, we have been wrong in thinking that we could solve every problem we have by introducing laws and legislations. Most of the time, we face a daring challenge against the national laws that are harmonised with international law. **So, from this point onwards, I believe that our journey should steer more towards educational campaigns to clean cultural prejudices and introduce transparent accountable governance.**

**The developments on women’s fundamental rights and freedoms are buried in the “deep culture”. I believe our only path to overcome this obstacle is through reconciling freedoms and traditions.**

I believe this is the main challenge we will be facing in the next two decades. It is not the States that need a consensus now; it is cultures and traditions.

Because today our struggle for human rights is not obstructed by the “resisting states” but “resisting traditions”.

For instance, let’s look at the on-going phenomenon of acid attacks against women following rejection of marriage, resisting against sexual abuse or family disputes. In Pakistan and other concerned countries, the lawmakers passed concrete laws and introduced severe penalties to fight against it. However, the numbers of victims either remains the same or increases.

In this case of law enforcement, the cultural willpower acts much stronger than the political or legal willpower. What do we do when the law enforcement officer believes that the victim is actually responsible of the crime?

Elsewhere, for instance in Afghanistan or Chechnya, child soldiers are recruited, child brides are wed, having been bought from their families. In most cases, there is not much trace of the use of force on the surface, as the families and receivers all seem to be in agreement. Then whom do we struggle against?

**My answer is that we struggle against a "deep culture" which sees this acceptable.**

**We need to focus more on cultural campaigns and maybe make that a benchmark for participatory democracy. Perhaps parliamentarians and governments should be responsible to come up with thorough cultural campaign plans along with human rights related legislation.**

In my opinion, we do not need more legal development on the normative side but we should focus on the implementation of what has already been adopted through education and accountability, good governance. I think it would be generally accepted that we can use human rights semantic as a reference and structure for standards of behaviour, what should be considered as acceptable treatment of human beings and social / governmental criticism.

We are still battling with the prejudices, discrimination and hate crimes of the past. Our duty is to remove these burdens from the shoulders of future generations.

Finally, as the organizers kindly asked if I could mention a few personal words on my journey, I've spent my life drawing attention to other peoples' life stories.

And here, I'll try to share a personal story, the story of Sitare, which has been a great company for me to keep my compass in the right direction, reminding me the value to fight for universal rights and freedoms.

I had just started on my new humanitarian mission in Iran, when I was called by the guard of our Tehran-based office, to meet a couple of Afghan refugees.

When I went downstairs to the medical unit, I saw a young woman looking at me – terrified, her eyes filled with pain.

In her tradition, her male relatives spoke for her.

This is how I met Sitare. By then, I did not know that she would be a turning point in my life.

Sitare had a medical problem related to her internal organs' and they wanted a female doctor to examine her. As we arranged for her long treatment process, I met her quite frequently and she began to talk with me slowly. Her story came out in bits and pieces.

She was born without limbs and was married off to an elderly man as his third wife when she was only 13 years old. She was the same age as me when we met, though, she had grown hundreds of years older by being a child-bride of the hard geography she lived in.

Being locked up in a dark room for many years where she was used only as a sex object. This was perceived as a right thing to do in the environment she was born into. Her disability meant she did not have any value as a human being, having feelings, despair.

Despite all, she had survived, escaped from conflicts in her hometown with her family, became a refugee in Iran, resisted the destiny imposed on her, believed in the existence of another, more hopeful future awaiting her.

Her silence and forbearance were the keys to her survival. I got attached to her with admiration. We overcome many things together. Now Sitare is back in her homeland where peace, social freedoms and human rights are on a cutting edge in a fragile state.

She is telling other girls in Afghanistan the possibility of another life other than being a child bride. Sitare's journey is one of my most important inspirations.

**I do not have big ideals. Simply put, wherever I go, I am searching for Sitares...**

**They are hard to find amidst the dust of extraordinary human-made disasters that have covered the face of the earth today.**

Ad yet, my personal mission is not over. Back in my homeland-Turkey, a 13 years old girl has been raped by 24 men. And just a little while ago, the higher court decided in its verdict that she actually played a part in this crime by willingly calling for rapists somehow and they reduced the sentence of criminals on these grounds. Now it is time to fight against this decision.

When faced with overcoming hopelessness, barriers, harsh traditions or anything, really, we find what we need often goes through healing the pain or wounds of others.

When you choose to involve yourself in common human struggles, when you choose to be a remedy for the problems of others, then your personal problems become less important.

**In short, Life sometimes is very difficult indeed. When the dust settles after a disaster – be it personal or societal-, it is too easy for people to find themselves in an inescapable, bad place. But looking inwards and making the problem bigger only leads to dead-ends. When we shut our doors to the problems of others, I believe we also miss vital opportunities to find our own solutions. I believe what we can do to try elevating one person or each other is more precious than targeting unreachable mountaintops.**

I shall continue to contribute in humanity's big adventure with my small experiences for human rights. And I am grateful that we are not alone. Thank you for your patience.