

# Shirin Ebadi: 'If books had been thrown at the Taliban instead of bombs ... we would not have Isis'

The Nobel laureate called on governments to cut arms budgets and increase education spending at a female peacemakers' conference in The Hague

Liz Ford, in The Hague

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If books instead of bombs had been thrown at the Taliban, and if schools had been built in response to the terrorist attacks on New York in 2001, we would not now be contending with Isis, Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi told a conference on Monday.

Ebadi, who was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 2003 for her work in promoting human rights in Iran, criticised the west for how it dealt with terrorist groups in the Middle East, and called on governments to cut their arms budgets.

Speaking in The Hague at the 100th anniversary of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Ebadi said: "If books had been thrown at the Taliban instead of bombs, and had schools been built in Afghanistan - 4,000 could have been built in memory of the 4,000 people who died in 9/11 - at this time we would not have Isis.

"Let's not forget the roots of Isis rest in the Taliban. Let's not repeat the experience. We have to remember that Isis is not simply a terrorist group, but an ideology, and ideologies cannot be fought with bombs. This ideology can only be fought with the correct interpretation of religion."

Ebadi, the first Muslim woman to be awarded the Nobel peace prize, called on UN member states to reduce their military budgets by 10% and spend the money saved on education and social welfare.

To cheers, applause and standing ovations, the three-day conference, entitled Women's Power to Stop War, opened with a tribute to the women who travelled to The Hague in 1915 seeking an end to the first world war, and whose actions led to the creation of WILPF.

Four Nobel laureates addressed the audience of more than 900 delegates from 80 countries. A fifth Nobel laureate, Tawakkol Karman, the Yemeni rights activist who received the prize in 2011, was unable to travel.

"We don't need another cold war, or to demonise other countries or dehumanise leaders," said Mairead Maguire, who was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 1976 for her work addressing sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. "We have no right to dehumanise other people and then take them out. How far have we sunk when we can sit down and plan how to take out another human being because we don't agree with their politics?"

Madeleine Rees, secretary general of WILPF since 2010, told the audience the global system was not equipped to bring peace. "We have a UN system, we have a charter, a declaration of human rights and we have treaties and conventions. We've had four world conferences on women, we have the women, peace and security agenda and world courts to adjudicate on all the above. So we should be pleased. But it's not working. We're still not able to bring the peace we have been demanding."

Rees, who previously worked for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Bosnia, said a multilateral system is needed but the current one is failing: "Our default position is intervention, when we know the cost and consequences of that intervention." She said the trillions of dollars spent annually on arms could have paid for the millennium development goals several times over, and warned that the increasing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few will continue the cycle of violence.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, total global military expenditure stood at \$1.8tn in 2014. One year of the world's military spending would finance more than 650 years of the UN's regular budget and more than 6,300 years of the budget allocated to UN Women.

"We have to reclaim peace," said Rees. "It's easier to not pay attention, and get on with our lives and be distracted. But we can band together. Each in our own way, we can all do something, and if we pay attention to what others are doing, then we have a movement. There are more of us wanting to end war than those who want it to continue."

At a later session, delegates heard that engaging men and boys in debates around violence was crucial to end conflict.

Anthony Keedi, programme manager at Abaad: Resource Center for Gender Equality, which works in the Middle East and north Africa, said men were conditioned to think that conflict is natural, but violence is a choice. "Men are taught not to empathise, not

to cry or show vulnerability as these are weaknesses. They are taught to be stoic,” he said. “Being taught not to empathise makes it easier to point and kill, to act violently.”

Part of Abaad’s work is to offer free psychosocial support to men and boys to reduce violence.

On Tuesday, WILPF will publish its manifesto, which will recommit the organisation to campaign for total worldwide disarmament and demilitarisation, to support an international system that guarantees international law and “to work towards a new international order free from neo-colonialism, political tyranny, economic exploitation and financial speculation, in which income, resources and opportunities are justly distributed between and within countries”.

“Violence is not inevitable. It is a choice,” says the manifesto. “We choose non-violence, as means and as end. We will liberate the strength of women and, in partnership with like-minded men, bring to birth a just and harmonious world.”

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