

Building Bridges for Understanding and Cooperation

International conference hosted by UNESCO in Paris on the role of women in peacebuilding

In early March 2026, Gabriela Frey spoke at an international UNESCO conference in Paris on the role of women in peacebuilding. Her contribution combines personal experience as a Buddhist with decades of commitment to interreligious dialogue at the European level, highlighting why genuine dialogue is more urgent today than ever.

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I grew up in a Protestant family in Hamburg and became a practising Buddhist at the age of fourteen. After the Second World War, my father had found inner peace through Buddhist writings. His experience profoundly shaped my own path.

One of the fundamental teachings of my Buddhist teachers is that all living beings share the same essential nature, possess the same inherent value, and deserve the same respect. This insight made me aware of inequality from an early age.

During my work at the European Parliament and on delegation visits, I travelled to Buddhist communities in India and across Asia. There I became acutely aware of the very different living conditions experienced by women and men. Women often had less access to education, healthcare and leadership positions. In many places, even the basic infrastructure for nuns was lacking. These experiences affected me deeply.

When I returned to Europe, I knew that I wanted to help bring about change. At the same time, it quickly became clear that challenges of this kind can only be addressed collectively. In 2006, together with friends and colleagues, I founded the French branch of the international Buddhist women's organisation Sakyadhita. From the outset, it was important to me that women and men work together in this endeavour.

It soon became evident that dialogue and networking are essential. Through the European Buddhist Union, a network of Buddhist women was established. I then began representing the EBU within European institutions and, following the EBU's admission as a participant in 2008, became actively involved in the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations at the Council of Europe.

Much is possible – much remains difficult

Working together with delegates from different religious traditions has repeatedly shown me how much can be achieved—and at the same time how difficult it remains to firmly anchor issues such as women's rights and human rights. Joint declarations are often developed through dialogue, yet important concerns sometimes disappear or are diluted in the final official documents.



At the same time, we are living in an era of growing tensions. Many societies are becoming increasingly polarised and insecure. Although most people long for peace, conflicts, nationalism and violence are on the rise. Particularly alarming is the continuing—and in many places increasing—violence against women, including its use as a weapon of war.

Our work has shown that these developments often have common underlying causes: ignorance, poverty and existential fears. Too often these are not confronted but projected onto others—onto minorities or supposedly threatening “outsiders.” This is how enemy images are created and violence is fuelled.

Peace, however, does not begin only at the political level. It begins within ourselves, within families and within communities. For this reason, I believe it is essential that religious actors become more actively engaged in peacebuilding and in strengthening social cohesion - working together across religious boundaries.

With this in mind, together with representatives of other faith-based organisations, I initiated the Committee on Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue within the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe. Our aim is to establish a permanent platform where this dialogue can take place on a continuous basis.

Such a platform was already proposed by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 2015. However, it has still not been implemented. We are therefore working to bring this initiative back onto the political agenda.

Dialogue must not remain abstract

One point is particularly important to me: dialogue must not remain abstract. Too often discussions take place on a purely theoretical level among a small number of decision-makers, most of them men. If dialogue is to be effective, it must be practical, rooted in everyday reality and genuinely inclusive. It must include the experiences of women as well as the perspectives of young people and local initiatives.

To support this vision, we have developed a network that collects and showcases examples of successful dialogue in practice. Its purpose is to connect inspiring initiatives, encourage mutual learning and make transferable approaches accessible to others.

Through regular online events, we bring together people from different religious and social backgrounds from across Europe. Together we explore questions such as: What role does education play in fostering peaceful coexistence? How do religious traditions influence the position of women? And how can we effectively combat discrimination and violence?

An equally important aspect is the reflection on gender roles - not only those of women, but also of men. Social cohesion and peacebuilding are shared responsibilities.

Women play a crucial role in this context. Throughout the entire conflict cycle, they contribute in many different ways: through humanitarian assistance, educational projects, the promotion of human rights, interreligious dialogue, journalism, and the creation of safe spaces for dialogue and healing. Much of this commitment remains largely invisible, yet its importance cannot be overstated.

If we are to strengthen social cohesion, democracy and lasting peace, we need structures that recognise, support and make these contributions visible. This also requires us to reread and critically reflect upon our religious traditions: Which interpretations promote equality, and which continue to stand in its way?

The challenges are considerable, and building sustainable structures for dialogue requires patience and perseverance. Yet in light of current global developments, one thing is clear: we cannot afford to wait passively for more dialogue to emerge on its own.

Genuine, gender-balanced interreligious dialogue is not a luxury. It is a prerequisite for peaceful coexistence in pluralistic societies and for democracy itself. If we succeed in strengthening this dialogue and making it practical and effective, we can build bridges - between people, between worldviews, and between conflict and mutual understanding.

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Further Information

NIRIC-Dialogue (Network for InterReligious and InterConvictional Dialogue & Initiatives) :
<https://niric-dialogue.eu/>

Committee for interreligious and interconvictional Dialogue
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/committee-for-interreligious-interconvictional-dialogue>