



Dr. Elmira Souleimanova a Woman of Peace

An Interview by Luz Maria Martinez

Since the break up of the Soviet Union we hear names like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan at times they become confusing or become all in one. We know that there is ethnic strife in some of these countries but we are not always sure which country is which and who is fighting with who, and why. It becomes confusing in this "new world order".

One thing we are sure of is that where there is war, women are affected. Some are suffering direct abuses and others are risking their lives and personal comfort to raise the voices of those being victimized. One such woman is Dr. Elmira Souleimanova, an activist, scientist and leader in the women's movement in Azerbaijan.

Q: Tell me a little about your country?

Elmira: Since 1920, Azerbaijan was part of the Soviet Republic. Now we are a country of 7 million people, located on the border of Europe and Asia on the coast of the Caspian Sea. It is a country of rich national resources, iron, copper, gold petroleum, gas and other minerals. We are also a country of cotton and natural silk. We have an ancient history, culture and heritage. In Azerbaijan we have more than 80 nationalities and ethnic groups represented, most being highly educated.

Q: Why is your country being attacked by the Armenians?

Elmira: Armenia is our neighbor next door. It is a small state with practically no natural resources of their own. The Armenians are trying to put forth a delirious idea of the "Great Armenia- from Sea to Sea." This means from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea. They have territorial pretensions to capture the lands not only ours, but of some other countries too. As we are their nearest neighbor, from time to time they have tried to cut off our lands. But they couldn't do anything more that create a sea of blood, death, and curse those whom they have given so much woe. If we lost some our lands now, it is only temporary. I am sure that with the help of the international community we shall make up all that we have lost.

Q: Is this not an ethnic war?

Elmira: Not at all, it is not national, ethnic, religious or any other kind of conflict. We have lived with one another for many years in peace, free of conflict have had so many mixed families from both nationalities. Today the entire world recognizes that we have become the victims of Armenian aggression in order for them to have their territorial expansion.

Q: Tell me about the women's movement in your country.

Elmira: In the former Soviet Union there was only one women's organization in each republic with the same name, "Women's Council." Now the women's movement in our country is represented by more than ten organizations and women's associations; Women and Development, Business Women, Petroindustry, Women's Rights Protection, Islamic Women's Council, Jewish Women's Council, etc. For the Beijing World Conference, we have an organization the National Preparatory Committee.

Q: Are you a member of any of these organizations?

Elmira: Surely, I am head of "Women and Development Centre", a centre where we study the worlds women's movement strategies. For example, the Nairobi Conference documents, the Jakarta Conference, the Draft Platform of Action of WCW, we work out strategies and priorities of the women's movement in my country. We prepared here the programme of priority activities for Forum '95 and shared with other NGO's through the National Prep Committee. We attract to this work not only women's groups but all the NGO's inside the country. The process will go on beyond Beijing. We try to discuss our problems in Parliament, to ratify women gubernatorial conventions and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW 1979) being among them.

Q: Tell me a little bit about yourself?

Elmira: I am a doctor of chemistry, a professor, honourable chemist and head of the laboratory at the Institute of Petrochemistry Processes in the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences. I specialize in

organic and petrochemistry, have authored more than 200 publications, and am responsible for thirty innovations in petrochemical syntheses. As a scientist and women's leader I have participated in lectures and reports in some gubernatorial conferences in more than twenty countries, for example, Germany, Austria, USA, Egypt, Jordan, Greece, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, etc. In Indonesia (1994) I was representative to the Prep Conference for Beijing '95. I was named as coordinator of the Central Asia Subregion NGO's for the upcoming Forum '95. So I am a member of Asia-Pacific Working Group. I'm married and happy to say that I have both a beautiful son and grandson.

Q. How did you get involved in the women's movement? In working on issues of peace?

Elmira: I had to choose this way of life. We lost our best sons, daughters. In the capital of my country, Baku there have appeared a new kind of compatriots who have never been seen before. It is impossible to be indifferent. Mothers who lost their children, who have become widows at a young age, orphans, refugees who lost everything they had fleeing from fire and war. I have seen so much woe and tears, young invalids who lost their hands, so many young women are being brutalized and some of them are going mad. They are so fragile mentally that touching them can send them off screaming and into a complete nervous breakdown. Some women are in deep depression and suicidal because they had to witness the sexual abuse of their small daughters or sister as well as themselves. I have seen thousands of refugees, women, children, elderly, living for so long in tents in camps. All our hostages, who are still in Armenia. Refugees need immediately to be returned to places of their origin. It's impossible to get accustomed to such a way of life. That is why we need to help. We have opened for them our houses and our hearts. I am sure that everybody who is trying to expand their richness must realize that when we die we take nothing with us underground. But those of us who can share some of our money, goods, etc, with those who needs it more, with love and respect. It is the richness of your own, of your prosperity.

Q: Have you seen any results since you have been involved?

Elmira: Yes, of course! The most important is that at the 39th U.N. Session a resolution was passed by the United Nations Commission on Status of Women. The resolution was adopted addressing the need to liberate and return to the countries of origin of all civilians, which includes women, children, and the elderly, who were captured as hostages at the time of war and armed conflict. This resolution must be put into practice before the Women's World Conference in Beijing.

Q: How can other women help you in stopping the atrocities that are occurring in your country now?

Elmira: All women, in each organization should try to do the best they can to stop the war, to help it's victims, to call on the world community to take effective measures against those states who are responsible for the violation of human rights, peace and security and apply economic, political and military sanctions. By appealing that there be repatriation of all the people of Azerbaijan and to allow women back to their homes.

To respect the human rights of the people of Azerbaijan.

To use the Beijing Conference as a place where we consolidate and urge those countries in war and armed conflict to undertake the rapid and unconditional release of women and children who have been taken hostage.

Q: These are big tasks how can women's organizations or individuals make a difference?

Elmira: We can find effective ways to influence the policy makers in our states. Organize dialogues between women in countries in conflict and between governments, NGO's and people of governments and different countries. We can also prepare strong conflict resolutions with appeals to the U.N., international bodies, heads of governments, and religious communities and invite them to input into World Peace policies. We simply cannot sit back and allow women in particular to be victimized all in the name of war.▲

