

**Keynote address to the Assembly for the opening of the 146th IPU Assembly**  
**By Franca Ma-ih Sulem Yong**

H.R.H The King of Bahrain,  
Mr. President of the Assembly  
President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union,  
Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union,  
Speakers, Members of Parliament  
Members of the diplomatic corps  
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen

It is such an honour to be here today in beautiful Bahrain and to stand before you who collectively represent the people of the earth. I have always longed for a platform through which I could share my message of tolerance and behold, the place is here, and the time is now.

May we please clap for *our host, the Kingdom of Bahrain, and the organisers.*

Once bullied into depression, I searched for peace everywhere until I found it through the divine power of forgiveness. I learned, from experience, that the peace I was searching for was all the while accessible to me. I also learned that I could only be at peace with others if I was at peace with myself and that peace is not just the absence of violence but a state of being and a lifestyle. Since then, I have dedicated my life to advancing tolerance, forgiveness, empathy and human fraternity as keys to sustainable peace.

I come as one but for many. I speak for the millions of people whom intolerance has rendered physically broken, emotionally shattered and socially petrified. I stand for the heroes who remain unrelenting in their drive to promote tolerance, inclusion and peaceful co-existence.

We have all had our bouts of trauma and triumph, yet we have made peaceful coexistence more complicated than it needs to be.

In our world today, not a day passes without instances of man's inhumanity to man. We live in an era where religion, culture, ethnicity, gender, race and different ideas have triggered unnecessary conflicts which could have been easily avoided if we just learned to tolerate differences.

The statistics are alarming! The Peace Research Institute in Oslo reports that at least 119,000 people died as a result of organised violence in 2021. In that same year, UNHCR also reported that about 89.3 million people were forced to flee their homes due to conflict and persecution.

But unfortunately, many of us here today are unknowingly complicit in these monstrosities; when we normalise an international space bound by self interest and an ugly thirst for power; when we let greed, envy and discontent linger in the minds of men unhindered; when we neglect and stigmatise mental health, forgetting that mental health is directly linked to inner peace and productivity. Ills like racism, tribalism and xenophobia are generally born from a distorted mindset or a desire to raise one's self or group above others.

Popularly dubbed "Africa in miniature" for its rich culture and biodiversity, my country, Cameroon, which should be a beacon of pluralism, has instead been plunged into a mire of deadly interfaith and

intercultural conflicts. In 2016, in what became known as the Anglophone Conflict, separatists in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon came into conflict with the central government. This conflict split my country along linguistic lines and bred tensions between the average citizens. To witness this was traumatising for me because as an Anglophone raised in Francophone Cameroon, I had embraced my dual cultural heritage. I longed for a Cameroon where people would not be judged by the foreign language they speak but by the content of their character. But as I interacted with victims of the conflict, I knew that this could only be possible when everyone's voice matters and where everyone has equal access to opportunity.

During this Anglophone Crisis, some of my relatives were killed and some took up arms and became combatants out of war trauma. I witnessed firsthand the harrowing realities of loss, deprivation and suffering resulting from the conflict. In 2018, I founded Afrogiveness, which I coined from two words "Africa " and "forgiveness" to use the universal language of arts to heal and diffuse tensions between survivors on opposing camps of conflict and intolerance. I set out to contribute my part to alleviate the suffering of victims by providing basic needs and training on income-generating activities. But I quickly realised how little progress was being made as our beneficiaries remained stuck in bitterness, vengeance and depression. It dawned on my entire team that unless the minds of these victims were healed, our efforts would remain futile and vicious cycles of violence would be fostered. Thus, we decided to empower survivors with the basic resources needed for dignified living and with the emotional intelligence needed to transform pain to purpose, so that even in seeking justice, they may shun hatred. This is helping to restore hope - and there is nothing more fundamental to the human spirit than hope.

As a trained art therapist, I seek to fill the mental health gap in relief efforts by using the unifying and cathartic power of the arts to help heal survivors and to puncture the myths that breed bigotry, divisions and conflicts. I have learned that tolerance is not about condoning what is wrong, it is about allowing people the space to be themselves as long as they don't hurt anyone.

In 2020, I founded the Afrogiveness Choir, Cameroon's first interfaith choir, which uses music to heal, connect and uplift survivors of conflict and intolerance while enabling dialogue, mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence.

In a recent experience, we had to bridge the gap between 3 groups of people in the Afrogiveness choir; one was a group of Muslims who found the use of musical instruments non-permissible and two other groups, one part Muslim, one part Christian, found the use of musical instruments permissible. This bred tensions and we had to find a way to have these three groups coexist harmoniously in the choir. So we did our research and came across "Halal Beats", a company that creates music with vocal-based soundtracks. We then decided to do two versions of all songs: the inclusive version and the Halal version. This satisfied both Christian and Muslim choristers and improved harmonious cooperation within the Afrogiveness Choir.

I learned from this experience that we can always find ways to co-exist if we really want to. We must find ways to co-exist, especially now that we really have to. To quote the famous leader, Martin Luther King: "We must learn to live together as brothers or we will perish together as fools."

In our increasingly fragmented but globalised world, it has become imperative - perhaps now more than ever, to compel peaceful co-existence as the rule of law. Although about 15 billion dollars is spent on peacebuilding processes each year, the world continues to suffer from conflict and

intolerance. This is an alarm bell for us to change our approach because we cannot keep doing the same thing and expecting a different result.

Fostering peaceful co-existence would require us to change the dynamics of power! The most powerful countries must not be measured by their nuclear force or military superiority but by their ability to stand for justice and yes, love. THIS would encourage an atmosphere of collaboration rather than competition and help to rebuild trust between people, countries and systems.

Dear legislators, in the spirit of nothing about us without us, we count on you to stand for our right to be stakeholders in every law enacted on our behalf and to continue to walk your talk on tolerance and to foster accountability in government. Please urge our leaders to lead by example so that tolerance does not become an empty word that will fade away like a ghost in the morning sun.

Two major things can make peaceful co-existence happen: Peace Education and Mental Health.

As Nelson Mandela said: "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.". Peace education can entrench in people values that keep them at peace with themselves, with others and with nature. For peace to reign, values must become law. Values are like pillars that compel us to do good even when tempted by evil, they keep us secure even during trying times and we all know how intolerant people can be when they feel insecure. So dear legislators, do not feel it is cheesy to enact laws on gratitude, integrity, forgiveness, empathy, kindness and even love. Through peace education programs, we can stamp out the "us versus them" syndrome and foster a world where youths do not blame but take responsibility for development.

Peace education can enlighten us on our shared rights and freedoms and our common humanity while countering the spread of online hate speech, fake news and cyberbullying through media literacy and digital citizenship education.

So we urge you, dear legislators, to make peace education a mandatory subject in formal and informal education programs.

There can be no peace without mental health as you can guess. Every conflict we experience today was brewed in the minds of human beings. Laws on Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing can help prohibit stigma and discrimination against survivors of trauma and mental illness, making it easy for people to seek help before they transfer aggression to others.

Dear Legislators, policy makers, ladies and gentlemen.

There is a kind of peace that we are yet to experience. There is a version of the world that we are yet to behold! This peaceful world depends on you, it depends on me, it depends on us all. May we be reminded that peaceful co-existence is a shared responsibility and a collective process which should be nurtured in our minds.

To paraphrase UNESCO's most cherished concept: "since wars begin in the minds of all, it is in the minds of all that the defences for peace must be constructed.

Thank you.