

*Sima Samar delivered this speech on 7 May 2026 to mark Ruth-Gaby Vermot's stepping down as president of PeaceWomen Across the Globe (PWAG), the organisation she founded over 20 years ago. Sima Samar, a renowned Afghan advocate for human rights and the advancement of women, is a long-time friend and collaborator of Gaby's and a member of the PWAG board.*

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is my pleasure to be with you and thank you for this honor. Let me start by acknowledging the suffering of the victims and survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, in my country Afghanistan and around the world.

I remember that my sweet friend Vreni Frauenfelder and I met Gaby Vermot in the Swiss parliament for first time in late 1990's. Unfortunately, I do not remember the exact date, but we both had our sleeping bags with us.

It was in a time before the 9/11, when the security was not too tight. At the time, my late friend and I were running to different parts of Switzerland to find money for education and health for Afghan women and girls. In that first meeting, I found Gaby very friendly and that she shared our thoughts and dreams for women around the world.

Then in 2003, when I was asked to join a group of dedicated women from around the globe and be in the meeting in Bern, where we discussed the human security and the Security Council resolution 1325. Gaby had this idea to nominate 1000 women from around the globe for the Nobel Peace Prize! I served as coordinator for Afghanistan.

Gaby stepped forward with clarity and purpose. She did not seek permission from anyone to promote women peace builders around the world. In a world that too often overlooked the quiet labor of women in the shadow of conflicts, not necessarily an armed conflict, but the world where patriarchy is the norm in the existing culture is in conflict, even in advanced and democratic countries, if we choose to see it!

The organization was able to nominate 1000 women from around the globe for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize, but guess who won the award? Mohamed ElBaradei won the award. For me, it was the testament to a dominant patriarchal culture even in the Nobel Peace Prize! I am not trying to say that the winner does not deserve it, but the work of one thousand women around the world was ignored by the Nobel Committee!

Of course, Gaby did not give up. She continued to promote women's role in peace building around the world, including at the UN headquarters and Geneva and so many other places.

Being a part of this initiative, I discovered so many friends and feminists from different parts of the world, and that violence against women is not only a part of the culture of the conflict in Afghanistan, but it is unfortunately a pandemic, in countries in conflict and so called normal and democratic countries.

If there is no equality between the people, not only men and women, but all of the people, a country is not in peace. This culture of inequality begins from the homes, where male members of the family claim they are superior to the female members of the family. This conflict goes from home to the streets, schools and to the society in general.

In 2008, the name of the organization changed to PeaceWomen Across the Globe. Through Gaby's leadership and networking, space was created where women peacebuilders could gather, share and learn from each other's experiences and recognize themselves as essential agents of change.

The PeaceWomen Across the Globe reached and inspired so many women of all ages to step forward, stake a claim in shaping peace, and know that their works matters. The continued work and advocacy reminded the world that peace is not only negotiated in conference rooms, but cultivated in homes, communities and everyday acts of courage.

This civil society organization is rooted in a simple but powerful belief that peace is strongest when women are at its center. As we all know, women are not merely victims of conflict, but architects of reconciliation, negotiators of fragile truths, and keepers of collective memory.

Vaclav Havel once wrote: "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out." It is a useful frame for my troubled country and also the situation of uncertainty that we are all in. Creating hope during the conflict and desperate situation is the key to survive and increase the resilience among the people.

Creating a civic space for the people to be able to raise their voices and continue to resist against the oppressive regimes everywhere is the important ingredient of resilience. Countries will not be successful when the population are silenced, particularly women.

The work that Gaby started 23 years ago needs to continue, particularly where the space for civil society is shrinking, under the excuse of sovereignty and security. The harshest example of oppression on women is in my country Afghanistan, where systematic, institutionalized discrimination and isolation of women – literally gender apartheid – are done by the Taliban. Unfortunately, we clearly see the backlash against women's freedom and rights all over the world, often led by the male leaders around the world.

It is really important to support the voices of women and civil societies around the world, including the support for the PeaceWomen, not as a symbolic act to look good but as a responsibility to protect our human dignity, if we really believe in the universality of human rights.

By promoting gender equality and respect for human rights values and principles, we can build sustainable peace, security and sustainable development, and promote accountability to end the culture of impunity.

The peace that national leaders everywhere try to bring by militarization and new destructive weapons are false peace and security, will not going to result in sustainable peace. My country

Afghanistan is a live example. I also know that supporting civic space is not easy, but surely it is impossible.

Thank you Gaby for leading us in this resistance. We all need to continue your legacy. I am proud to say that you are my friend. Let's stand united to promote accountability, justice and save our dignity.

Bern, 7 May 2026