

"My only clan is womanhood": Building Women's Peace Identities

By: Shelley Anderson – WPP Program Officer

The belief that war is inevitable is closely connected with the belief in certain fixed gender roles. War, as researchers such as David Adams, Cynthia Cockburn, Betty Reardon and Joshua S. Goldstein show, requires a certain set of gender roles. War demands a pool of men conditioned to use violence upon command. It also demands a pool of women who support this use of violence. Changing such gender roles undermines the very essence of a war system.

But can human beings change? Is war inevitable? Are men inherently violence and women inherently passive? Fortunately the answer is no. Change is possible. We are not condemned to violence, David Adams writes, and he points to certain commonalities in the inner processes US activists like Jane Addams, Martin Luther King, Jr., and A.J. Muste have gone through on their way to becoming leaders for peace. Are these psychological processes universal? Can peaceful identities be taught? Are the stages women go through in order to become effective and dedicated peacemakers the same as the stages men go through? Given that the life experiences of women and girls are different from those of men and boys, the latter is a key question. More research needs to be done to answer all these questions.

Sociologist Cynthia Cockburn has examined how women peace activists in the Balkans, Cyprus, Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine have been able to cross divided communities, devise common solutions to conflict, and work together for peace. "Women," she writes, "learn from women's lives. Women's lives are different in many ways from those of men. Women's characteristic life experience gives them a potential for two things: a very special kind of intelligence, *social intelligence*; and a very special kind of courage, *social courage*. The courage to cross the lines drawn between us--which are also lines drawn inside our own heads. And the intelligence to do it safely and productively."

Adams writes that a sense of affiliation, or feeling part of a community, versus individualism, is an important part of the development of a peace identity. This sense of affiliation is certainly key in many peace women's development. Women are often in the middle of extensive family and kinship networks. They are often socialized from birth to be responsible for the maintenance of these relationships. In many societies, women also move away from their families of birth and into a new family network upon marriage. They have, in the normal course of their lives, already crossed certain divides. This may give women an advantage as peacemakers. Women may have a personal commitment and link to several different communities that are in conflict. Women may also have experience in the skills of trust building and relationship building that can be utilized in making peace between communities in conflict. Yet this advantage may also come at a cost, as the story of Asha Haji Elmi illustrates. Women's lives contain many contradictions and complexities.

The Sixth Clan

Several successful examples of this come from opposite sides of the world. The women's group Pro Femmes/Twese Hamwe in Rwanda has built "peace villages" which bring together both Hutu and Tutsi widows and orphans, in a graphic illustration that the two communities can live together again after the brutal 1994 genocide. Peace women in Cyprus have organized a bi-communal choir, children's peace camps, and internet networks in their work to bridge the divide between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities.

Save Somali Women and Children (SSWC) was the first Somali cross-clan organization, said one of SSWC's founders, Asha Haji Elmi. "We began in 1992, after two years of civil war. This first initiative came from women in cross-clan marriages," she said, citing bitter personal experience. "I was divided in two. My birth clan rejected me because my husband was from a clan they were fighting. My husband's clan considered me a spy and a stranger. Where do I belong? I realized the only identity no one could take away from me was being a woman. My only clan is womanhood."

Meeting across clan lines was revolutionary-and dangerous. "For the first six months we couldn't say that our objective was peace. People were suspicious of us for several years, because we wanted to use women as a bridge for peace. We wanted to unite Somali women as one and to have one voice towards peace. Some war lords tried to destroy and divide us. They are the same ones who realize only God can stop us, so now they shake our hand."

During the first Somali Peace and Reconciliation conference in 2002, only men were recognized as official delegates. This was because only representatives of Somalia's five clans were allowed as official representatives-and traditionally only men represent the clan. The small cross-clan group of women Asha Haji Elmi led to the talks was denied a platform as they were not official clan representatives. The women responded by demanding a place in the negotiations as representatives of Somalia's sixth clan-the clan of women. The sixth clan was officially recognized, and the women were able to get a quota in the final resolution for women in government. Today, for the first time in Somali history, there are women in Parliament.

Save Somali Women and Children (SSWC) continues to work for peace. The women have managed to reopen some of the no-go streets in parts of Mogadishu. In the past walking or driving down such streets meant risking death at the hands of snipers or a war lord's patrols. Now there is safe access to Bender Hospital, the main paediatrics hospital. Closed for eight years, the hospital is again open. SSWC is now conducting the Somali Give Peace a Chance campaign, which uses "the extensive women's networks to encourage communities to support the top-down peace initiatives" of the transitional government.

The Politics of Listening

In Northern Ireland, too, peace women were able to cross dangerous divides between communities. Women successfully formed a political party in order to provide input into the multi-party talks that led to the Good Friday Agreement. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) united women from both the Protestant and Catholic communities and paid particular attention to including previously marginalized sections of the communities in the talks on Northern Ireland's future. The NIWC campaigned for issues that would make or break a sustainable peace, including improvements in health and social services; recognition of the rights and needs of victims of violence; the establishment of a Ministry for Children and Families that would promote direct access by young people to decision makers; and fair employment policies. Former US Senator George Mitchell, chair of the multi-party talks, noted the vital contributions the NIWC made to the peace process. The NIWC's most important contribution, according to one member, was its development of a "politics of listening".

This politics of listening is closely linked to a real connection and concern many women peacemakers show for the realities of daily life. Adams has written about how moving from arm chair theorizing to action is one characteristic of US peace leaders. Armed conflict increases the burden of caring for the family, a responsibility which often falls on women's shoulders. Women peacemakers often engage in very pragmatic and practical action, as opposed to abstract theorizing. Grounded in everyday realities, this approach can lead to creative and innovative forms of nonviolent actions. Women's everyday reality frequently involves juggling many complex issues and identities. Thus, women's actions may address a whole range of interlocking issues. Women's peacemaking can thus be very holistic, as the following examples show.

Don't Let Companies Cheat You

Many women peace activists today are working within a framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of issues of sustainable development, justice and peace. A just economics, where there is an equitable distribution of resources and where such resources are used for human needs rather than military needs, is the cornerstone of such a framework. The following examples of the connections between peace and the just distribution of wealth come from Africa.

Occupying oil facilities, and taking oil officials hostage, is nothing new in Nigeria's oil-rich Delta State. Men, often armed, try to take over the oil facilities periodically in order to force oil officials to make good on promises of jobs, running water and electricity for local communities. Their efforts meet with counter violence from the police.

All this changed in the summer of 2002, when 600 unarmed women occupied the ChevronTexaco oil terminal in Escravos, Nigeria. For ten days they surrounded 700 Western oil workers and forced oil officials into negotiations. The women from the Ugborodo and Arutan communities wanted jobs for their sons, electricity and running

water for their villages; the building of schools, clinics and town halls; and help in building fish and chicken farms so they could sell the food back to the facility's cafeteria.

How did unarmed women succeed where armed men had not? "Our weapon is our nakedness," explained one woman. The women employed a traditional shaming device. They threatened to strip naked if the oil company did not meet their demands. It worked. Despite reinforcements of 100 police officers and soldiers armed with assault rifles, oil officials agreed to hire five people a year over the next five years, to install water and electrical systems in the villages, and to build schools and a town hall.

The women were well organized and practical. They brought with them food and a clear strategy. "I was the leader of the air strip team," explained Anunu Uwawah. "If any plane came, I would drive my people there and we circled it." After the successful action, women from other villages occupied four other ChevronTexaco oil facilities in southeastern Nigeria. Uwawah offered this tip to others: "I give one piece of advice to all women in all countries: they shouldn't let any company cheat them."

Green Africa

Trees are essential to village life in Kenya. Some trees are considered sacred and used in rituals to make peace; others are used to build homes. Collecting firewood for cooking and heating is a daily chore for village women. Deforestation results in erosion and is a stumbling block to development. Lack of development increases the burden on women of providing for the family.

Dr. Wangari Maathai sees these connections. In 1977, through the National Council of Women of Kenya, she launched a movement to protect the environment and to promote women's leadership. Using seedlings grown in her own backyard, she educated women on the need to plant trees. The highly successful nonviolent Green Belt Movement was born.

Today an estimated 80,000 people, including women and school leavers, have salaried work through some 3,000 nurseries in Kenya. Seedlings are raised and then sold to the Movement. Green Belt Rangers, mostly disabled people, educate communities on the planting and care of the seedlings, and regularly check that all is going well, thus ensuring an 80 percent survival rate for the trees. Over 20 million trees have been planted on farms and in compounds of schools and churches across the country. The Green Belt Movement has spread to 30 other African countries.

The struggle has not been easy. Wangari Maathai was clubbed and jailed for leading a civil disobedience campaign to save Uhuru Park in Nairobi's center. Police closed down her office to protect politically well-connected developers who wanted the Park for a construction project. In January 1999, she and two supporters were hospitalized after being attacked at a peaceful demonstration in Karura Forest, in northern Nairobi. She had led an attempt to plant seedlings there to replace trees that had been felled by real estate

developers. The next month, after three Members of Parliament were arrested for inciting the protests, she barricaded herself in her own home to avoid arrest.

The struggle to save Karura Forest was also a struggle against government corruption, as then-President Arap Moi had transferred the land to private developers in order to raise money for his re-election campaign. The previous year, in October 1997, Wangari had organized an invasion of the Forest, to stop development of a luxury housing project. The fifty armed guards threw down their guns and ran away when they saw 500 activists marching on the site. The activists burnt the site offices, disabled concrete mixers and trucks, and planted over 2,000 trees.

"We have a special responsibility to the ecosystem of this planet," Wangari says. "In making sure that other species survive we will be ensuring the survival of our own." After the December 2002 elections that brought in a new government, Wangari was appointed Assistant Minister for the Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife. In December 2004, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Religion: A Double Edged Sword for Women

Adams has also written about the importance of personal integration and support from family and friends for peacemakers. This support is critical for women peacemakers. It sustains them, especially when many societies do not support women's acting and speaking out in public. Women especially find courage to speak out from their faith. Many women peacemakers are concerned with the psychosocial, relational and spiritual aspects of peacebuilding. Buddhism, and the practice of Buddhist meditation, is crucial in Aung San Suu Kyi's continuing fight for democracy in Burma. Her Buddhist practice sustained her during almost seven years of house arrest. Adams has also written about the role anger plays in US peace leaders' development. Anger is a very problematic issue for women, as it is one emotion women are forbidden to express in many societies. Women peacemakers like Aung San Suu Kyi have written about how their spiritual practice helps them transform anger.

Other women peacemakers find their spiritual practice also sustains them, and helps them grapple with often painful issues of forgiveness and reconciliation. Yet religion, too, is a complex issue for women. While acknowledging the spiritual sustenance it provides in dangerous situations, many male religious leaders and masculine interpretations of religious texts deny women's leadership abilities and space in public life and discourse. In the USA, women trainers from the Muslim Peace Fellowship and the Baptist Peace Fellowship are pioneering training mixed groups of Muslims and Christians together in active nonviolence, in an attempt to heal the increasing mistrust and fear between these communities. They are also developing a more woman-oriented interpretation of their religious texts.

Such interfaith peacebuilding is crucial in a world where religion is increasingly becoming a factor in conflict. In the Netherlands, the Christian Vera Tenrue and the Muslim Farida Pattisahusiwa co-founded the peace group Women for Peace in the

Moluccans. In addition to organizing migrant and refugee women together in the Multicultural Women Peacemakers Netherlands, they have initiated women's dialogue groups and peace projects in the Moluccan Islands itself. In Bougainville, women peacemakers united all Christian denominations on the Pacific island into the Inter-Church Women's Forum, which has helped train women throughout the island in vital peacebuilding skills. Hiking alone into the jungle to persuade rebel soldiers to lay down their arms, Bougainville women are an example of the resources religion can provide for peacebuilding.

Conclusions

Women lead complex lives. They juggle many identities and responsibilities. Women are often custodians of traditions which provide a strong identity and at the same time marginalize them and deny them a space in public life. Women's peacemaking reveals this complexity. Women's peacemaking also reveals more insights on what may be needed to bridge the divides created by armed conflict, and to heal the wounds such conflict creates.

Activists in women's peace movements have broken new ground in developing strategies, organizations and tools for peace. Their work is often grounded in the pragmatic realities of daily life, realities which have the potential to lead to new definitions of peace. "There is a masculine conception of security, which involves an individual assertion of your own power and influence, pushing your own interests until there is a counter resistance," stated former International Alert Secretary General Kevin Clements at the 1999 international seminar 'The New Paradigm of Peace, Security and Development: A Gender Perspective' organized in Finland's parliament. Other definitions of security can differ from concepts of peace based on weapons or superior military strength. "Women know they are most secure when in solid relationships, reciprocal relationships based on cooperation. We need to assert this holistic understanding of how we relate to one another more," he said.

All of this points to the simple fact that peace needs a gender perspective. Peace is also not possible without the active involvement of women and girls. Any movement for peace cannot ignore women's roles in supporting conflict. In order to develop any model of how peace identities emerge, gender must be taken into account, and in particular the complexities and contradictions in women's lives. Likewise, any movement for peace cannot afford to ignore the energy, ideas and leadership women and girls bring to building peace

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Further Resources

Women's Work: The Story of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, Kate Fearon. 1999, The Blackstaff Press, Belfast.

You Can't Kill the Spirit, Pam McAllister. 1988, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia.

This River of Courage: Generations of Women's Resistance and Action, Pam McAllister. 1991, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia.

Green Belt Movement, PO Box 67545, Nairobi, Kenya. Tel. 254 2 573 057. Fax 254 2 504 264. Email: gbm@iconnect.co.ke Web: www.greenbeltmovement.org Also organizes Green Belt Safaris which provide home-stays and visits to development and environmental projects.

"The Naked Truth: Successful Nonviolent Takeover by Nigerian Women," edited by Walter Wink and Jo Clare Hartsig, Fellowship: a magazine of peacemaking published by the Fellowship of Reconciliation/USA, Vol. 69, No.3-4, March/April 2003. Web: www.forusa.org

The Muslim Peace Fellowship/Ansar as-Salam, PO Box 271, Nyack, New York 10960, USA. Tel. +1 845 358 4601; fax +1 845 358 4924. Email: mpf@forusa.org. Web: www.MPFweb.org

Peacewomen is the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's on-line resource for news about women's peace activism and developments on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325: www.peacewomen.org (in English, French or Spanish).