

**WOMEN AND A CULTURE OF PEACE
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Is it a cliché to suggest that women are “natural” peacemakers? Does this image stem from a perception of women limited to their roles as wives and mothers, or does it reflect some kind of truth common to all women?

Traditionally women have been acknowledged as peacemakers within the home, separating squabbling children, focused on the value of human life and the paramount need to protect and cherish it. Now that women are playing much wider roles in society, gender-based assessment seems to show that women have something special to contribute to the larger realization of peace.

In her paper, “Mainstreaming — Gender Perspective in Multidimensional Peacekeeping Operations,” Angela King, U.N. special adviser to the secretary general on gender issues and the advancement of women, laments the shockingly low-level of participation by women in peacekeeping operations. At the same time, however, she cites examples, mostly drawn from the community level, of how women active in peacekeeping operations were able to cooperate with local women’s groups and, through them, local communities. She described how this enabled local populations to develop a sense of ownership of the process.

She continues: “Women members of the mission were perceived as more compassionate, less threatening and insistent on status, more willing to listen, learn and opt for reconciliation over force.”

She adds that the conclusions drawn by male military and political leaders “have often little to do with the feelings of the local population and the root of the problems.” She then calls for women to reconsider their own attitudes and become more actively involved. Women should, she says, demand and actively pursue full participation.

The same point was stressed by African women meeting in Zanzibar in May 1999 to develop a Women’s Agenda for a Culture of Peace in Africa. “While women and men share a common concern for the increase in violence and armed conflicts, our perspectives, experiences and capacities remain grossly ignored and underutilized in conflict prevention outside the family context. Women have primarily been considered as the victims of conflict. There is a need to encourage and support African women to enter into decision-making roles in all areas of policy, including conflict prevention, management and resolution.”

The question, of course, remains as to why women have actually gained access to the inner circles of power have often failed to prioritize peacebuilding. Perhaps the all-out struggle involved in gaining that access has served to “select” less peace-oriented women.

Some would say that women naturally are happiest and strongest within the NGO sector where they can put forward alternative perspectives and press for change. Professor Johan Galtung, founding father of peace studies as an academic discipline, praised the efforts of women at the grass roots in his dialogue with SGI President Daisaku Ikeda (*Choose Peace*) saying, “Women made tremendous positive contributions to the peace movement of the 1980s. They were everywhere.... In dialogues, their ability to transcend limited themes — for example, missile enumerations — and to think in human and holistic terms was an indispensable asset.

“Women go straight to the heart of human suffering and happiness. Without being

trapped by mental abstractions and the social hierarchies.... Typically they establish people-to-people diplomacy and do the principal work themselves.”

To date, it is women’s grassroots solidarity, shown through protests, marches and other forms of noncooperation, which has undeniably provided the groundswell of opposition to military action and the arms race in many countries around the world. Examination of countless conflict situations reveals that there are grassroots efforts pioneered by “ordinary” women working across divisions to rebuild trust and shattered communities. Solidarity between women can clearly cut across all barriers of status, race and religion.

At the 1999 Seoul International Conference of NGOs, SGI hosted a workshop on “Women Leading the Way Toward a Culture of Peace.”

Judith Large, conflict resolution specialist with extensive experience in the Balkans, central Africa and Indonesia, looked at bridge-building work which has been initiated by women in each of these areas.

She described the situation in the northern Uganda where the war in southern Sudan has resulted in over 10,000 children being kidnapped and used as either sex slaves or child soldiers. Women who were rural development workers in the towns of Gulu and Kitgum decided that they had had enough.

They organized “People’s Voices for Peace” and used local radio to call out to the children, saying they would not be treated as enemies. They galvanized religious leaders, Christian and Muslim, to work together, and international opinion was rallied. Finally, in October 1999, a weeklong conference entitled “Peace Research and the Reconciliation Agenda” was held, involving local people, mothers, local government, international NGOs, religious leaders and the prime minister of Uganda.

Ms. Large highlighted common qualities that women involved in this kind of peace work possess in her experience: 1) a belief in the primary and sacred nature of life and in the futility of violence; 2) a sense of compassion for others; 3) a commitment to the power of healing and bridging divided communities; and 4) a commitment to tempering the misuse of power and working for social justice.

Mikiko Otani, lawyer and the representative of the Soka Gakkai Women’s Peace Committee, then spoke about how women can work to build a culture of peace in Japan and other societies which are, nominally, at peace.

In Japanese society, discrimination against women and ethnic minorities is widespread, and this kind of passive violence must be viewed as contrary to a culture of peace. Ms. Otani outlined how issues from violence in schools to environmental degradation and the risk of nuclear accidents, which threaten life and dignity are “peace issues.” She argued that all women should make efforts to educate themselves and “create a circle of peace around them through dialogue and open interaction with others.”

In the ensuing discussion, several participants returned to the point that the “healing and harmonizing” work which women have been doing at a family and community level for centuries has not achieved peace and that nothing will change until women play full roles in decision-making bodies.

Another highlighted how there can be no contradiction between the roles women play at home and in wider society. If women still believe that by staying quiet and submitting to male domination in the home they are “keeping the peace,” they cannot hope to contribute to peacebuilding on a wider scale.

The role of the media and film industry was also highlighted—the challenge for peaceworkers is to produce images of peace and nonviolence which are as interesting and

gripping as those of war.

UNESCO is coordinating an extensive program of activities aimed at promoting women's participation in the building of a culture of peace. Details can be found at www.unesco.org/cpp/uk/projects/gender.htm

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