

Women, Peace, and Feminism

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Whenever you hear the word “peace,” do you immediately think of “war,” and men? To many people, “peace” is often an antonym to “war.” “Peace” events we see in the media often involve leaders of various nations shaking hands or signing peace treaties. Sometimes, United Nations envoys are shown diligently resolving conflicts among ethnic groups or nations. The envoys and leaders in those scenarios are usually men, as if they were the only ones who make peace after wars are started — by men.

When Wangari Maathai, an activist struggling for women’s rights and environmental conservation in Kenya, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year, some were displeased. The dissatisfaction however did not come from the fact that Maathai is a woman, but from the concept that “environmental conservation” has nothing to do with “peace.” Yet, here was Maathai’s answer to the criticisms, “many of the wars that are being fought are over resources: oil and water in the Middle East; minerals, land and timber in Africa. I think what the Nobel Peace Prize is doing is going beyond war and looking at what humanity can do to prevent war.” Insightfully she also added, “In managing our resources efficiently, we plant the seeds of peace.” The Nobel Peace Prize Committee also described her interpretation of the ideal of “peace” from a gender perspective. “She has taken a holistic approach to sustainable

development that embraces democracy, human rights and women’s rights in particular....Maathai combines science, social responsibility and political activities. More than simply protecting the existing environment, her strategy is to secure and strengthen the very basis for ecologically sustainable development.”

Maathai is not the first woman to have won the Nobel Peace Prize. She is the 12th in more than 100 years’ history of the Prize. Among the twelve women award-winners were successful political activists, such as the Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in 1991 and the two Northern Ireland peace movement leaders, Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan, who were jointly awarded in 1976. The list also includes famous female human rights leaders such as the winner of 2003, Shirin Ebadi, who is a human rights lawyer from



1931 Nobel Peace Prize
awardee Jane Addams

http://nobelprize.org

Iran, and Mother Teresa from India, who had much of her work devoted to the suffering humanity and was awarded in 1976. In terms of ethnic origins, in the early years, female winners were mostly from European countries or North America. For example, both the 1931 winner and the 1946 winner, Jane Addams and Emily Greene Balch, were the American members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

Despite the various backgrounds of the winners, it is worth noting that the concept of "peace," manifested in the male and elitist dominated Nobel selections, has seldom gone beyond the prevention of conflicts and wars between nations, religions, or ideologies, even though the concept might have extended to concerns regarding post-war damages and issues such as landmines, diseases, instability, and cold war. Although occasionally there were exceptions, people and organisations like Mother Teresa or Doctors Without Frontiers, it is difficult to transgress this dominant concept of peace.

When Maathai won the award this time, though it still bears the mark for "elite" winners (Maathai has a doctoral degree in biology and is Kenya's Deputy Minister for Environment and Natural Resources), the selection has nevertheless opened a new possibility for the peace movement. It acknowledges environmental protection and human rights awareness as strategies in preventing wars, which are generally started with conflicts over resources. In addition, it sees environmental conservation, women's movements, and political movements as working hand in hand. In this sense, the basis for "ecologically sustainable development"

that the Nobel Prize Committee has referred to would of course include the change in humanity and ecology brought on by the tree-planting movement. The women who have become aware of human and women's rights within the movement will continue their work because of their awareness.

Regarding the mainstream interpretation of peace, we can see a similar line of thinking in the development of the discourse of peace and feminism. The discussions of feminism and peace initially started with criticisms of "war." There have been two levels of criticisms, targeting two different meanings of "war." The first relates to wars or conflicts at their tangible level among nations, races, or between a government and its people. The second relates to the more abstract level of war, such as the sexist language that is often embedded metaphorically in "military" terms or in war descriptions.



1976 Nobel Peace Prize awardee Mairead
Corrigan

Eco-feminism further argues that besides putting women in the role of being “conquered” by men, the symbolic language of war also “womanizes” nature, and lets it be freely “conquered” by men.

At the tangible level, feminist critiques first target what often happen directly to women during wars, such as women facing sexual harassment, being forced to provide sexual service, or committing suicide to avoid being raped by the enemy. Some examples are the women’s mass suicides in the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, the sex slaves (or the “comfort women”) of the Japanese army during the Second World War, and the mass rapes of Chinese women by Indonesian men during the 1999 Indonesia ethnic conflict (for details, see the feature essays on “Feminism and Nationalism” written by Lau Kin Chi, Dai Jinhua, Chan Shun Hing, and Sun Ge, in *Reading* [Beijing] March 1993). Second, at the same level, feminist critiques also focus on wars as causing sufferings of women, children, ethnic minorities and the poor as well as damage to the environment. For example, in the 1980s, workers in the uranium mines in the United States were mainly native Americans. The large amount of highly radioactive uranium wastes were dumped on the lands of native Americans and caused their young people to suffer from genital cancer at a rate seventeen times higher than that of the national average. Finally, the feminist critiques also draw people’s

attention to the role of women in the anti-war movements, such as those who participate in the Mothers of May Plaza movement (Madres de la Plaza Mayo). In the last 20 years, mothers have not stopped gathering at the Plaza every Thursday, fighting for democracy and for the search of children who have gone missing during the dictatorship in Argentina.

When criticising the ideologies or the symbolic significance of “war,” post-modern feminists have pointed out the sexist war-like language in daily life and their symbolic meanings. For example, they point out that the female body or reproduction is often written as the battlefield of men and such a metaphor is an important element structuring and strengthening the “naturalness” of wars. In addition, “strategy” as a kind of military language has become part of everyday language and this has strengthened the dichotomy of “self/other,” “ally/enemy,” because self/ally need to look for the other/enemy to conquer. Eco-feminism further argues that besides putting women in the role of being “conquered” by men, the symbolic language of war also “womanises” nature, and lets it be freely “conquered” by men. For example, the United States called New Zealand, which refuses to let nuclear weapon or nuclear naval vessels to enter its territories, the “land of nuclear virginity.” The US also described the first nuclear test in India as the “loss of virginity.” In the view of eco-feminists, the “war-ism” that regards conquering other people/nations/races as being natural is very much in line with the patriarchal frame of mind that makes conquering women natural for men. In this sense, from the feminist point of view, nobody should ignore the damages to women and the

environment by encouraging war, violence, militarism, and conflicts among different areas and ethnic groups.

It should be noted that the feminists' peace discourse mentioned above does not necessarily mean that women are all "pacifists." Some feminists think that women can participate in "wars of justice." For example, some national liberation wars are seen as a necessary means to relieve the suffering of women and their families and are therefore good for the nation. However, some feminists argue that this view towards war could conflict with the idea of feminism itself because violence is inherently a patriarchal way to resolve problems and women therefore shall not participate in them. Yet, one may note that this line

and hence might restrict women to only the "private" sphere.

Feminist Sara Ruddick, however, promotes an idea called the "Maternal Peace Politics." It argues that maternity, which comes from the role of being a mother (or a caretaker), includes not only love, care and sense of responsibility. It also includes resistance. Being a mother unavoidably includes having to experience conflicts with children, with family members, or with society. In this sense, the maternal quality of caring about one's child would certainly serve as an important force in reconstructing peaceful relationships, such as what motivates the mothers in the May Plaza movement. When extending this idea to international issues, "Maternal Peace Politics" involves "renunciation, resistance, reconciliation, and peacekeeping." "Peacemakers create a communal suspicion of violence, a climate in which peace is desired, a way of living in which it is possible to learn and practice nonviolent resistance and strategies of reconciliation." Finally, it should be noted that some feminists are critical of Ruddick's "Maternal Peace Politics," such as why fulfilling the role of motherhood is the most appropriate approach to develop the ethics of care among nations, or whether there may be unequal power relationships between mother and children.

The feminist discourses described above still relate "peace" closely to the prevention of "war" or to the improvement of international relationships, but not to everyday life. In 1999, the United States Institute of Peace organised a conference to discuss the issue of women and peace. In the conference, they brought a different perspective to the issue: "The definition



1991 Nobel Peace Prize
awardee Aung San Suu Kyi

of thinking may potentially regard women as being inherently or naturally peaceful and therefore is still problematic. It may stereotype women as "nature"-related, as maternity-related,

of peace as “not war” ignores the high levels of domestic and societal violence suffered by women even in times not characterised by violent political conflict or in the period immediately following a conflict.’ (Donna Marshall 2000: “Women in War and Peace: Grassroots Peacebuilding,” US Institute of Peace). They argue that peace should be a culture and a lifestyle that includes respect for equality, justice, and rights, so that everyone, especially women who are at the grassroots level and are most vulnerable to violent conflicts, can enjoy a safe living environment and opportunities of development. In fact, the work of Maathai, to an extent, has manifested this idea. Now, the on-going project of “1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005” has nominated a thousand women with their on-the-ground experiences, which will more powerfully and comprehensively rewrite the gender content of peace movements and the concept of peace through the everyday life perspective and the experiences of grassroots women.

Though thousands of women like Maathai who quietly work for peace do not need a

Nobel Prize to recognize their contributions, the Prize could draw attention to a larger set of audiences and initiate more conversations about the issue because it is a well known international award and has symbolic value. Yet, the project “1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005” does not base its success on whether the Prize is won. Rather, it focuses on promoting exchange and discussion during the process of research and nomination, and hence on participation and awareness, so that the women peace-workers in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan may get to know each other and compare their experiences, and may even be able to coordinate with each other or to work together in the future, promoting peace-building. ☞

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