

# Women and Peace: A Dissenting View

by Lori A. McElroy and Tana Dineen

A major objective of the feminist movement has been to challenge gender-stereotyped divisions in our society. Yet, although we have been quick to reject stereotypes of woman as man's inferior, we now seem reluctant to challenge stereotypes emerging in the peace movement of woman as man's superior. This assumed superiority of women is evident in the image of woman as peacemaker and man as warmonger that currently predominates in the peace movement. The belief that women have a greater commitment to peace than men and that feminism can provide alternatives to conflict needs to be critically examined. The purpose of this paper is to identify a dilemma that we, as feminists and peace activists, see emerging from current attempts to link feminism and peace, and to encourage feminists to directly confront this dilemma.

The connection between women and peace is based on a foundation of questionable assumptions. One of the fundamental assumptions is the idea that, due to their nurturing roles, women have a greater vested interest in the lives of their children and, by extension, in the survival of the entire species. Women are seen as automatically 'caring' for others, as automatically assuming responsibility for the emotional well-being of the family, and as automatically approaching family conflicts with everyone else's interests in mind. Although women are biologically equipped to nurture life and, in most cultures, usually do play a much larger role than men in the rearing of young, this does not mean that women have an innate drive to nurture or that they are more psychologically 'caring' than are men. The vision of woman as nurturer, when extended unquestioningly to the entire species, can take on terrifying proportions.

We will begin this paper by describing a personal scenario in which such a disturbing vision confronted us. We will then begin to formalize some questions about women and men in relation to peace and war. Finally, we will try to articulate the dilemma we see emerging. We will suggest that feminists need to focus on the conflicting images and consider alternative, more constructive ways of linking feminism and peace.

In Halifax, in June 1985, at the international conference *Women's Alternatives for Negotiating Peace* we attended the screening of the film, "Speaking our Peace." According to the co-directors, Terri Nash and Bonnie Sherr Klein of Studio "D" of the National Film Board, the film was based on the premise that "women are traditionally the peacemakers, in real daily ways" because of their experience in the traditionally assigned

role of nurturer.<sup>1</sup> In the film their portrayal of men as the cause of war and women as the solutions concerned us. Our concern increased when we saw the uncritical acceptance that this film received by the audience of feminist peace activists. Our concern turned to shock when, after viewing the film, a male colleague of ours stood up to address the almost entirely female audience. He began by trying to say something complimentary about the film, but his words were drowned out by loud booing from the audience. He was booed because, as a man, his positive remarks were viewed as patronizing. Of course, had he criticized the film he would have also been booed. In our view, there was nothing he could have said that would have been accepted because, as a man, he was viewed as the enemy and *anything* he could have said would have been discounted. This blatant and aggressive example of reverse sexism so shocked us that we quietly left the conference and wandered the streets of Halifax until early the next morning, trying to make sense of what we had just witnessed.

This experience sensitized us to some disturbing aspects of some feminists' approach to peace. We have realized already that feminists can be sexist and that peace activists, even *women* peace activists, aren't always peaceful. Since women have long been viewed as man's inferior, both morally and intellectually, it is not surprising that some women should now want to present themselves as man's superior. We were puzzled, however, by why some women who critically examine and reject many traditional views about women could so uncritically accept the view that women are more peaceful than men — a view which is based on the stereotype of woman as nurturer. We were also disturbed by the mass hysteria



Cartoon by Peter Dockwrey

which had swept over a group of intelligent and articulate women. It was frightening to see that, as they developed an appreciation of their own power, these women chose to deny any responsibility for the state of the world and instead chose to blame men.

After this initial exposure, we began to realize that the tendency to blame men for war was becoming rather wide-spread. The most well-known proponent of this view is peace activist Helen Caldicott, who states in her book *Missile Envy* that "A typical woman ... innately understands the basic principles of conflict resolution." She goes on to argue that men, because of their hormonal output of androgen, are "typically more psychologically aggressive than women."<sup>2</sup> Other examples of blaming men are easy to find. Canadian peace activist Dorothy Rosenberg is "a staunch feminist" who claims that "we are victims of 'patriarchal values.'" She blames most of the world's evils — hierarchy, militarism and competitiveness — on patriarchy. Women's values, she thinks, are nicer and could make short work of the planet's worst problems if given a chance.<sup>3</sup> The most extreme example of blaming men is presented by feminist Sally Miller Gearhart, who argues that to reduce the level of violence in the world the number of men must be reduced to 10 percent of the world's population.<sup>4</sup>

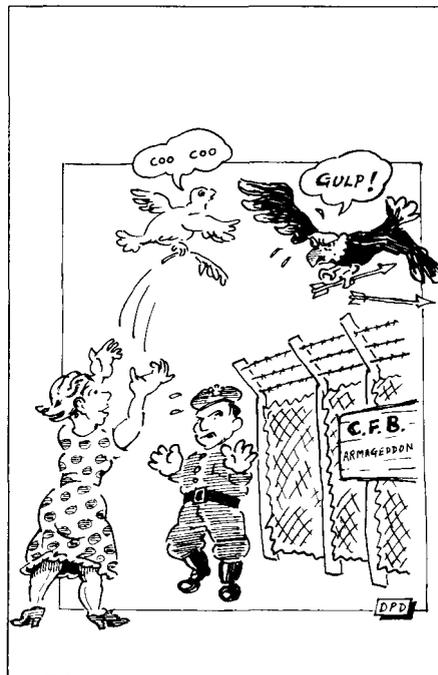
It is, of course, true that throughout history men have almost always been the ones to declare and to conduct war. It has been men, rather than women, who have had the opportunity to do so. It is therefore all too easy for some women to declare that their sex has greater moral fortitude. But would a society in which women have an equal share in power be any more peaceful? Or would women be corrupted by power, just as men have been? Some examples we have of women in power — such as Margaret Thatcher, Golda Meir, and Indira Gandhi — suggest that women, by virtue of their sex alone, do not necessarily have immunity to warfare. It seems that when given the chance, some women are as willing as some men to condone and even actively participate in combat. Shelley Saywell, for example, became aware of this through interviewing women who had participated in war as nurses, reporters, spies and even as soldiers. In her book *Women in War*, Saywell

admitted:

*I wanted to hear that women are innately more pacifist than men, but I learned that they can be every bit as determined in their willingness to kill and die for their beliefs. At the same time I was often told that ultimately women are mothers and want above all to nurture and preserve life.<sup>5</sup>*

This quote articulates the dilemma that these women lived; the conflict between their image of themselves as mothers and nurturers, and the reality of war that made them take up arms. Draft dodgers, deserters and soldiers suffering from battle fatigue are extreme examples of a similar conflict that some men face. For men, the conflict is between their image of themselves as brave protectors, and the reality of their fear of death and their reluctance to kill. We should also not overlook the fact that many men, including ex-military people, are increasingly questioning the use of military force to resolve conflict. Some men, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, died while trying to resolve conflict through nonviolent means.

Just as men are assumed to thrive on violent approaches to conflict because of their 'aggressive instincts,' so women are assumed to habitually approach conflict with a conciliatory perspective because of their ability to identify with the other



Cartoon by Peter Dockwrey

party involved. We suggest that these assumptions are based more in myth than in reality. Women seem to approach conflict in the same way that men do. In a conflict situation, whether at the personal or global level, we all tend to objectify the other party and view them as the enemy. In his book, *Faces of the Enemy*, Sam Keen argues that we are, as a species, enemy makers:

*We human beings are Homo hostilis, the hostile species, the enemy-making animal. We are driven to fabricate any enemy as a scapegoat to bear the burden of our denied enmity. From the unconscious residue of our hostility, we create a target; from our private demons, we conjure a public enemy. And perhaps, more than anything else, the wars we engage in are compulsive rituals, shadow dramas in which we continually try to kill those parts of ourselves we deny and despise.<sup>6</sup>*

For many women today, especially feminists, the enemy is men.

Men may be more physically violent than women, but that does not necessarily mean that women are more peaceful than men. Although most women don't usually have the power — either physical or political — to act violently, when given the power, some women tend to use it in ways similar to men's. We might add that 'blaming men' can be considered a form of psychological violence. Perhaps 'manbattering' is reaching epidemic proportions in our society and, perhaps this is being reflected in both the women's and peace movements of the 1980s.

By viewing war in terms of patriarchy and a biologically-based male propensity for aggression, we absolve women (us) of any responsibility for causing the problems of the world, and also deny men (them) and responsibility for solving them. In so doing, we could be trapping ourselves in the type of mirror-image misperceptions which many psychologists have suggested underlie the superpower conflict. Is it not possible that misperceptions and the need for scapegoats fuel the battle of the sexes, just as they do the arms race?

The view of man as warmonger and woman as peacemaker is both limiting and dangerous because it reinforces the traditional stereotypes about men and

women. The only difference is that now the traits associated with female stereotype are considered to be more valued, rather than less valued, than are those associated with the male stereotype. However, this image of woman as nurturer is precisely the view of women that feminists in the 1970s, such as Betty Friedan,<sup>7</sup> worked so hard to dispel. This is the same stereotype that has been used to justify the oppression of women by suggesting that our natural role is caretaker for the species. We do not believe that this image is needed to justify the involvement of women in the political sphere. This stereotype is unnecessary, and serves only to limit women because it still takes away our freedom to express our individual personalities and presents those of us who do not fit the stereotype as unnatural.

Even feminists who acknowledge the limitations that stereotypes create for women in politics can get caught in the same trap. Ruth Messinger, a New York City Councillor, complains that "Women are stereotyped as 'caretakers' and expected to do for others." Yet she accepts the stereotype of nurturing woman when it can be viewed as a strength rather than as a weakness: "Women can make politics more collaborative."<sup>8</sup>

Despite the gains we may wish to believe that the woman's movement has made, people's attitudes are still strongly influenced by stereotypes. In a recent study,<sup>9</sup> a hypothetical presidential politician, identified as either a man or a woman, was rated on a five-point scale for his or her ability to carry out various tasks. These tasks could be classified into three groups: traditional masculine items related to the defense of the country, traditional feminine items dealing with social issues, and neutral items. American college students, both male and female, rated the 'man' higher than the 'woman' on the masculine items, and the 'woman' higher than the 'man' on the feminine items, but they were rated equal on the neutral items. If this is typical of the attitudes of the American electorate, then the chances of electing a woman as president is remote since, when selecting a leader defense issues are likely still considered more important than social issues.

Perhaps the reason some women still cling to the stereotype of nurturing woman is because rejecting it would re-

quire that they reject the belief that a good woman is a self-sacrificing woman. According to Carol Gilligan's theory of moral development,<sup>10</sup> only women who have reached the highest level of moral development can reject this "feminine attitude" and take responsibility for the choices they make — even, perhaps, for the political leaders they help to elect.

The flip side of the benevolent view of nurturing woman is, in fact, what Germaine Greer has termed "tyrannical nurturance." She was referring to the tyranny of mothers over their children. We are now faced with the spectre of the tyranny of women over men. If, as women, we would stop identifying primarily with our biological function, we could start identifying with the human species and begin to accept some responsibility as part of the cause of — as well as part of the cure for — the state the world is in. While taking a feminist perspective can be very productive, especially in challenging the status quo, we must be careful to guard against the tendency to absolve ourselves of any responsibility. As Rosemary Radford Ruether has argued, "women may have a particular vantage point on the issue. But they are not immune to expressions of hostility, chauvinism, racism, or warmongering."<sup>12</sup>

To link feminism and peace meaningfully will require that we openly address issues such as the ones we have discussed in this paper. Once we move beyond blaming — whether the object of blame be a person, a country, an ideology, or 'men' — we can assume responsibility for the state of the world and accept peace making as a shared human task. In the words of a woman who fought in Palestine for a Jewish homeland, "I believe strongly in women taking part in their country's defense, not because I'm a woman's libber but because I feel we have to share the responsibility."<sup>13</sup> We would add that the ultimate liberation is sharing the responsibility — for peace and for war.

<sup>7</sup>L. Connell, "Speaking their peace," *Peace Magazine* (Toronto: Canadian Disarmament Service, June 1985), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup>Helen Caldicott, *Missile Envy* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985), pp. 316-317.

<sup>9</sup>Metta Spencer, "Profile of an activist: Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg," *Peace Magazine* (Toronto: Canadian Disarmament Service, February 1986), pp. 10-11.

<sup>10</sup>S.M. Gearhart, "The future — if there is one — is female," in P. McAllister, ed., *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism & Nonviolence* (Philadelphia: New Society Pub., 1984), pp. 266-284.

<sup>11</sup>S. Saywell, *Women in War* (Markham, Canada: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1985), p. ix.

<sup>12</sup>S. Keen, *Faces of the Enemy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 10-11.

<sup>13</sup>Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1962, 1983).

<sup>14</sup>R. Messinger, "Women in power and politics," in H. Eisenstein & A. Jardina, eds., *The Future of Difference* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1980), pp. 319-322.

<sup>15</sup>S.M. Rosenwasser, R.R. Rogers, S. Fling, K. Silvers-Pickens and J. Butemeyer, "Attitudes toward women and men in politics: Perceived male and female candidate competencies and participant personality characteristics," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 8 (1987), pp. 191-200.

<sup>16</sup>Carol Gilligan, "In a different voice: Women's conception of self and of morality," in H. Eisenstein & A. Jardine, eds., pp. 274-317.

<sup>17</sup>Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Granada Pub. Ltd., 1971).

<sup>18</sup>R.R. Ruether, "Feminism and Peace," in Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Christine E. Gudorf & Mary D. Pellauer, eds., *Women's Consciousness/ Women's Conscience: A Reader in Feminist Ethics* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), p. 73.

<sup>19</sup>Yaffa, in Saywell, p. 311.

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