

THE URGENCY FOR TRUE SECURITY: WOMEN'S ALTERNATIVES FOR NEGOTIATING PEACE — A REPORT ON THE 1985 INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S PEACE CONFERENCE

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Ann Denholm Crosby fait un rapport sur la conférence internationale des femmes pour la paix qui a eu lieu dernièrement à Halifax et à laquelle ont assisté 350 femmes venues de 35 pays. Elle décrit comment, dans ce contexte de discussion ouverte, se sont formées les contre-propositions des femmes dans la négociation de la paix.

A Conference Statement, Action Plans and Resolutions were the formal products of the Women's International Peace Conference held in Halifax on 5-9 June. These documents are the things we can hold onto, point to as achievements and use, along with the vast amounts of information and empathy we exchanged, as tools for change. In addition, we all emerged from the meetings with renewed personal commitment and strong feelings of support for and from women from around the world. But what about women's alternatives for negotiating Peace? Did we fulfil the conference mandate? Did we define women's alternatives? Did we set them down? In fact, we did and perhaps in the most concrete way possible: they emerged as part and parcel of the conference. Women's alternatives, the manner in which women would negotiate Peace, were revealed in the tone, the structure and the activities of the conference itself.

THE ASSUMPTION OF PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE

The phrase 'What is most personal is also most political' was heard daily at the conference and, coming from the mouths of committed women, it is both powerful and the essence of women's alternatives. The phrase deals with the basics: the way life is, the way it should be and the 'how to' in getting from here to there. It also recognizes that the imperial attitudes of power and aggression are contrary to the personal and are therefore the systems to be changed rather than the systems to

effect change as is presently the case in world politics.

As we heard formally and informally from the 350 women present from 35 countries, it became obvious that our similar concerns far outweighed our cultural differences. As Doris Elders from the German Democratic Republic remarked, "We are talking from an assumption of peaceful co-existence." Compared to the way in which the world is now run, that in itself is a radical assumption and it is perhaps women's first alternative to the present negotiating system. It is both personal and political and it set the tone for the conference.

The conference opened with the topic "What True Security Means To Women." Marion Kerans, the conference co-ordinator, began the morning by pointing out that "Governments' definition of security is not women's definition." Margareta Inglestram from Sweden enlarged upon this by defining the lack of security that the majority of the world's children now experience. Children, she said, are murdered in Africa and are starving in Calcutta. Fifty percent of the population in war-torn Nicaragua are children and there are nine year-old prostitutes in El Salvador. "The conditions of life are now the conditions of death," she said. "A child's security must be the measure for the world."

Shareen Samarasuriya from Sri Lanka said that she could not even begin to define true security in her country where two-thirds of the population lives below the poverty line and economic problems are complicated by ethnic and political problems. The youth have been armed, she said, and prejudice is being reinforced. Starvation and violence are a way of life and since people are not allowed to gather in groups of more than seven, organizing to combat these problems is impossible.

Olga Nunez de Escorcia from Nicaragua described her country as a land of death and destruction brought about by

foreign intervention. Under these conditions, she said, even the traditional nurturing role of women is subverted, for mothers are forced to leave their children, sons are killed and children are kidnapped. Samia Bakri, an Arab Israeli, said that 95% of secondary students in Israel do not want Arabs in Israel, and under these circumstances, how can one feel secure? Susanna Ounei from Kanaky, formerly French Melanesia, described the effects of French imperialism in her country. Not only is the area contaminated from nuclear testings, she said, but the French control mineral production, tourism and agriculture. Of 68,000 Kanaky people, only 7,000 are employed.

THE ROOTS OF THE PROBLEMS

Speaking in the evening of the first day, Canadian delegate Ursula Franklin stated that "The roots of world wide conflict are in the Imperial Systems and the solutions are also there." Using Nicaragua as an example, she said that the roots of the Nicaraguan problems are in American foreign policy and that we in Canada and the U.S. are closer to bringing about solutions than are the Nicaraguans. This was met with consensus and formed women's second alternative for negotiating Peace — to address the roots of the problems, not the manifestations as is most often the case in the present negotiating system.

The second day of the conference was spent on the topic "How Does The Arms Race Affect Women?" Again, the stories reflected the personal and defined the political. Carmen Del Rio from Chile described how her people do not feel poor but povertized. The 'Third World,' she said, is the market for the weapons of the 'First World' and, because of the money being spent on warfare, there are no resources left for economic or social needs. The phenomenon of the 'Third World' has been created and sustained by the 'First.'

In fact, the term 'Third World' fell into

disuse as the conference progressed for it indicates an 'us' and 'them' attitude which is contradictory to the notion of peaceful co-existence. By the same token, 'underdeveloped countries' also faded from the vocabulary. As one woman pointed out, we are all underdeveloped. If the 'Third World' is underdeveloped economically, it is because the 'First World' is underdeveloped mentally.

Carmencita Hernandez, a Canadian from the Philippines, described the Philippines as being a rich country – fourteenth in world food production and sixth in gold – but, because of the domination of the massive U.S. military presence in the area, 82% of the population lives below the poverty line.

COMPROMISE

Speaking at the same plenary, Mona Khauli from Lebanon described a typical day in her life. It began at 6:30 a.m. with listening to the radio to see if it was safe for the children to go to school and ended in the evening waiting to see if they would return home unharmed. On a daily basis the family's movements and activities were defined by the fighting in the streets.

The Middle East, she said, is a testing ground for foreign weapons and terrorism. For example, in one day alone, twenty-five different shells were retrieved and they were manufactured in fifteen different countries. At the best of times, she told us, the situation is tense but it is manageable. However, with the super-powers practicing a subversive program of divide-and-conquer, which leaves hundreds of thousands of refugees living within their own borders, the situation is out of hand. "First the Palestinians were displaced," she said, "and now the Lebanese and the end is not in sight."

She went on to say that the roots of the Middle East conflicts are to be found in foreign power manipulations and that the solutions include "reconciliation through sacrifice not domination." This was the third alternative to emerge – women's willingness to compromise, to take a bad situation as a given, a historical fact that can not be altered and to evolve solutions through compromise, not retribution. The past can not be changed, but the future can not be governed by the same rules.

The afternoons of the first two days were spent in small group workshops; after the intensity of the international experience in the mornings, there was some frustration in suddenly finding

ourselves in small groups which, because of the overwhelming number of Canadian delegates to the conference, had a predominantly Western point of view. However, as we informally discussed the International women's stories that we had heard first hand, we began to understand just how inaccurate and manipulated is our media coverage of world events. As well as perpetrating the concept of 'enemy' put forth by governments, which gives rise to a false sense of right and wrong, the media also tends to focus on the overt and aggressive 'us' and 'them' movements of the male power plays.

TRUST

A fourth alternative was emerging – the conviction that negotiation can only take place in a climate of trust. Women from around the world were defining their problems and the solutions: it is these definitions that have to be acted upon. This, again, is in direct contradiction to the present negotiating system wherein the powerful nations define both the problems and the solutions for the less powerful and the powerless.

The third day of the conference was devoted to the topic "What's Wrong With Present Negotiations?" As various delegates addressed the subject in two simultaneous plenary sessions, it became clear that present negotiations do not come close to touching the concerns of women. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie from Nigeria described how the present negotiations do not consider the human populations of the 'Third World.' "Nigeria," she said, "is not strong enough to make a difference, to influence the negotiators." Tetua Doom from Tahiti described the effects of negotiating from positions of power and the more than 100 nuclear tests, resulting from this attitude, that have taken place in the South Pacific. The fish in the area cannot be eaten and the coconut milk is contaminated; yet environmental concerns are not even addressed in the present negotiations. "To negotiate," she said, "we have to have the right to negotiate and my people do not have that right. The dominators are speaking for the dominated." Kristin Einarsdottir from Iceland added that, "What now exists is not negotiation but confrontation."

A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

Due to illness, Rosalie Bertell from

Canada was unable to take her place at the plenary session, but she sent notes in which she pointed out the grotesque irony of the present negotiating system in which the people with the vested interest in the arms build up – the military leaders – are the ones who are attempting to negotiate Peace. Concentrating on what can be done, as opposed to what is wrong, she suggested that women must band together to improve life; to distribute food and resources; to establish alternate trade policies and organizations; to put needs over wants; to form a global public sector of people committed beyond our national interests; and to deny and refuse the interests of "bully nations."

From this session, another women's alternative for negotiating Peace emerged. Disarmament is the first – but only one – step in establishing world wide Peace. True Peace negotiations must address justice, environmental concerns, food production and distribution, economic development, health, education, racism and sexism, as well as militarism. Establishing world wide Peace is an all encompassing endeavor.

At this point, two and a half days into the meetings, the conference began to take on a life of its own. We had talked and we had listened and now there was frustration mounting as to what we could *do*. Many women had taken considerable personal risk in travelling to the conference and in speaking out. For them and for others, conference resolutions would give support to their work in their countries. For still others, resolutions would galvanize activity. Consequently, there were calls from the floor for resolutions.

Accordingly, the afternoon small workshop sessions concentrated on devising action plans and by the end of the day it became apparent that one afternoon would not complete the work. Moreover, Saturday's planned model negotiating session had become irrelevant. Engaging in the traditional process, even with a women's agenda, seemed to be a self-defeating exercise because the process itself bore too many negative connotations.

FLEXIBILITY

Consequently, the last two days of the conference focused on devising and ratifying Resolutions, Action Plans and a Conference Statement. In fact, the process itself was an exercise in negotiating, in our own style. In two days, 350 women from 35 countries, exercising trust, compas-

sion, understanding and compromise, wrote, revised and ratified a general conference statement, a seven-page list of action plans, and 56 resolutions with emphasis directed towards 16 countries and the relationship between national problems and international intervention. As one woman remarked, men could not do that even *with* secretarial help!

Although the content of these documents was in itself important, it was the exercise itself which demonstrated women's alternatives for negotiating Peace. Flexibility was the key word: when it became apparent that the needs of the delegates were not going to be met by the conference design, the design was changed. By comparison, flexibility is notably absent from the present negotiating system.

These were the formal sessions but the women's alternatives for negotiating Peace which emerged from them were in evidence elsewhere in the conference. On

Sunday, the delegates from China, Russia, the United States and the German Democratic Republic spoke in turn, not from political affiliations but from the common experience of the desired quality of life throughout the world. One of the workshop sessions entitled "Creating Conditions of Partnership Between Arabs and Jews," originally scheduled as a two-hour session, grew to four hours stretched over two days. Women from Egypt, Lebanon and Israel – both Arabs and Jews – talked about their lives in the Middle East; they explained how, without foreign intervention, peaceful co-existence could be established. We do not hear that in the West: we hear only that foreign intervention is necessary.

Celebration, too, was a key note to the conference, reaffirming the necessity of joy in all our lives. There were mime performances before the official opening on Wednesday night; an evening of multicultural entertainment on Thursday;

Salome Bey sang on Friday before the National Film Board's screening of "Speaking Our Peace;" and on Saturday a number of Halifax groups and individuals sang and entertained, finally coming together at the end of the evening to lead the delegates in a song of celebration which ended in a spontaneous snake dance through the auditorium, dismantling even the private barriers of self-consciousness.

In retrospect, the conference itself was a demonstration of women's alternatives for negotiating Peace. Under the assumption of peaceful co-existence and with attitudes of compromise, trust and flexibility, women discussed world problems, defining the roots of the conflicts and describing the comprehensive nature of the solutions. *Is that not the true formula for Peace negotiations?*

Ann Denholm Crosby has written several drama series for CBC radio.

PRIÈRE À FRANÇOISE

Femme trop belle
Eprise d'absolu
Femme immortelle
Salie, souillée, perdue

Degradée, abaissée
Du mal des autres
Fustigée par un défilé
D'apprentis apôtres

Fille trop gaie
Trop aimée, trop adulée
Trop pétulante
Trop ravissante

Fille éblouissante
Avenante, intelligente
Inquiétante, offensante
Enrageante, "dérangeante"

De l'ordre établi
De poitrines rabougries
De seins affaissés
Sur leur débordement

De mauvaises pensées
de plein consentement
De ferme propos,
D'orgasme au repos

De mâle en chasse
D'ignorance crasse
D'effort morts nés
Fruits d'une société

D'autorité en place
D'autorité en masse
Le beau, le bien, le bon
Le bon bout du bâton.

Merci Seigneur!
Vous m'avez tout donné
A moi les honneurs . . .
A moi la bonté . . .

Amen

Hermine Leroux Perron
Laval, Québec