# Feminism, Peace, Human Rights

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*Cet article examine comment les féministes tout au long du vingtième siècle, surtout depuis la progression de la mondialisation et de la montée des intégrismes ethniques et religieux, ont trouvé utile les comparaisons interculturelles, le partage des analyses et des stratégies tout comme de bâtire des solidarités internationales pour la paix.*

**Demanding the protection and promotion of the human rights of all as a central tenet of peace-building helps to ensure that inequities be addressed.**

Generalizations about women and peace are difficult, especially for a white U.S. American who has not experienced war first-hand, but whose government has conducted countless military operations around the globe. What I do hope to do here is to raise some questions that come from struggling from that location to be simultaneously a feminist, human rights and anti-war/anti-imperialist activist.

Acknowledging when and where we enter is a central tenet of feminist inquiry. Questions of women and peace/war are very particular, having to do with the specificity of each conflict—of time, place, race, ethnicity, class, religion, and other discrete circumstances—as well as related to various social constructions of gender, of masculinity and femininity. In that sense peace and the relation of women to war is a very local issue. And yet, women and war/peace is also a very universal subject discussed in a variety of ways for centuries. Throughout the twentieth century, and especially with the intensification of globalization and the rise of religious and ethnic fundamentalisms, feminists have found it useful to make cross-cultural comparisons, to share analysis and strategies, as well as to build international solidarities for peace.

There is a dynamic tension between the universality of this subject and the need for global action by feminists on the one hand, and the necessity of being grounded in the particulars of each situation and not overlooking real differences among women on the other.

## Peace, Human Rights, and Gender

First, what do we mean by or expect when we talk about peace? Most women's peace activism springs up around particular conflicts and does not begin with a plan for world peace. But we must ask what are the conditions necessary for a permanent peace to be achieved. We should look at the existing regional and international structures for peace making and peace keeping, like the UN, and at the assumptions of the men who created them to see if those assumptions—like the emphasis on national sovereignty—are a sound basis for peace. We must ask what it will take to en-gender these structures and transform them into more effective vehicles in the quest for peace, security and human rights for all. Otherwise, women will always be re-acting to patriarchal wars.

We face these questions today in a difficult context, made more complex by the events of September 11 in the U.S. and their aftermath. We have seen the most extensive development of nuclear, biological, and other weapons of mass destruction in the last half century that would seem to serve as a sufficient argument for why global structures to ensure peace are now a necessity for human survival rather than just a desirable vision. But rather than being more peaceful, we entered the twenty-first century with many unresolved civil and ethnic conflicts and an increasingly militarized daily life where the lines between civilians and combatants seem ever murkier. We have sophisticated local and global terrorisms, a rise in the political use of religious extremism, an expanding arms trade led by the world's one remaining super-power, and the structural violence of the widening economic gap between haves and have-nots. Indeed, one compelling argument for women playing a greater role in peace-building and governance today is the perception that women could hardly make a bigger mess of the world than male leadership has done over the past centuries.

In this turbulent time, what then do women make of peace? The first aspect of peace is an end to violent/armed conflict—the absence of war—or what is called "Negative Peace." But this is not enough to ensure that armed conflict will not arise again nor does it address questions of what is needed to end all forms of violence—militarization, the structural violence of racial and economic injustice, or the ongoing violence against women in daily life.

"Positive Peace," on the other hand, is a term used to

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describe an "alternative vision" that leads to the reduction of all forms of violence in society and moves toward the "ideal of how society should be" (Women Building Peace Campaign of International Alert cited in Pankhurst and Anderlini). It is also concerned with justice and the larger dynamic of domination or power over "the other" as a mode of human interaction.

Indicators of the conditions of justice and equity that comprise positive peace are spelled out in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), whose framers in 1948 saw the promotion and protection of human rights as critical to preventing genocide and war in the future. The UDHR spells out broad principles of both *political/civil rights* and *socio-economic* human rights that constitute a considerable commitment to justice, development and equality as the basis for positive peace. While we know these rights are not the world reality and their pursuit has been misused, nevertheless, movements seeking justice around the globe have continued to utilize the concept of human rights and the vision embodied in the UDHR as standards that their governments and the international community should uphold.

Feminist perspectives of positive peace build on the expanding world of human rights concepts and practice. Demanding the protection and promotion of the human rights of all as a central tenet of peace-building helps to ensure that inequities be addressed and that peace should not be purchased at the price of simply allowing the prevailing military powers to have their way. Human rights principles also demand that the pursuit of justice not allow for the impunity of war criminals after a peace accord is reached.

Central to feminist conceptualizations of peace and human rights is the recognition of a continuum of violence against women, in which all forms of violence are seen as interrelated. The institutionalization of male dominance is maintained by violence and the threat of violence leads us to question whether the term "peacetime" provides an accurate description of the lives of most women. As two South Asian feminists noted when responding to the question of whether feminism disrupts 'peaceful' homes, "one person's peace can be another's poison" (Bhasin and Khan).

War and armed conflict bring additional violation to women's lives, but these are linked to the gender-based violence and abuse of women in "normal" life. Thus, violence against women in war brings together the subordination of females with their membership in other targeted groups, expresses women's status as the property of the men in her community, and reflects social acceptance of violations of women more generally.

Ending the violence of militarism, war and racism is tied to ending violence in the home. These are mutually reinforcing forms of violence that must be challenged simultaneously.

Further, when violence is tolerated in an everyday way in the family at the core of society, children come to see violence as an inevitable part of conflict and a natural way to deal with differences in all areas of the social order. Thus ending the violence of militarism, war and racism is tied to ending violence in the home. These are mutually reinforcing forms of violence that must be challenged simultaneously.

While it is primarily women activists and feminist theorists from all regions of the world who have pioneered work on the gendered nature of war and conflict (e.g. Elise Boulding, Jacklyn Cock, Cynthia Enloe, Ritu Menon, Betty Reardon, Simona Sharoni, Yayori Matsui, etc.), one "scientific" study by a male political scientist is of interest here. Joshua Goldstein has sought to show why there is so much cross-cultural consistency in gendered war roles, even when there is great diversity of cultural forms of both war and of gender roles when considered separately. He concludes what many feminists have contended that gender and war are inextricably linked:

> Gender roles adapt individuals for war roles, and war roles provide the context within which individuals are socialized into gender roles. For the war system to change fundamentally, or for war to end, might require profound changes in gender relations. But the transformation of gender roles may depend on deep changes in the war system. (10-11)

**Human Security vs. National Security**

The term "human security" has come into greater use

recently as a way to describe an integrated vision of positive peace, human rights, and development. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report, as well as United Nations (UN) Secretary General Kofi Annan in his Millenium Report, speak of security less as defending territory, more in terms of protecting people. Non-govermental organizations (NGOs) have called for redefining security in terms of human and ecological needs instead of national sovereignty and borders. This requires a new social order that ensures the equal participation of marginalized groups, including women and indigenous people, restricts the use of military force, and moves toward collective global security (Hague Agenda for Peace and Justice in the 21st Century cited in Hill and Ranson).

**Since September 11th, governments in all parts of the world have used terrorism as an excuse to jettison commitment to some human rights in the name of national "security."**

Rita Manchanda notes:

> the human security discourse has come up from below, from peoples and groups excluded from the national security debate, defined and articulated by civil society groups, social movements and marginal groups, especially women. (1)

This term has emerged as an alternative to the state centered concept of "national security," rooted in the military security-defense domain and academically lodged with "realists" in the field of International Relations.

Feminists challenge the military paradigm by asking questions about whose security does "national security" defend? For example, in looking at East Asia, some have concluded:

> The security treaties ... that provide for U.S. bases, military operations, and port visits in South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines also compromise the security of local people. Negative social effects of the U.S. military presence on host communities include military prostitution, the abuse of local women, and the dire situation of mixed-race children fathered by U.S. military men. (Kirk and Francis 229)

Wider acceptance of the paradigm of human security holds promise for women, but we know how easily feminist perspectives can become marginalized as a concept becomes more mainstream. For example, a Joint Proposal to Create a Human Security Report from Harvard University and the UN University presented in May of 2001 outlined an ambitious plan to create a report that would map key systemic causes of armed conflict and violent crime as well as a human insecurity index. Yet, while no group lives in greater insecurity than females around the globe, the proposal *never* once mentions women, gender, masculinity, rape, violence against women or any other concept that has emerged out of several decades of feminist work. A similar absence was reflected in a call from *Human Rights Dialogue* for essays on "Human Rights and Public Security." Much of the feminist discourse on these issues has never been read by men in the field and can still be overlooked unless women are vigilant about ensuring that the evolution of this concept fully encompasses the female half of humanity.

Efforts to advance peace and the concept of human security were set back by the events of September 11th and the ensuing resurgence of the masculine dominated discourse on defense. Media response to this crisis proved a rude reminder that when it comes to issues of terrorism, war, and national security, feminism is not on the map. There was rich discussion about these events among women on the internet, but public commentary in the Western media was dominated by male "authority" figures. Even the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, one of the first to frame a response to 9/11 from the perspective of international law by suggesting justice for this act of terrorism be pursued internationally as crimes against humanity, rather than as a call to war, was quickly side-lined by the U.S. and the United Nations.

It is women who have been targeted by fundamentalist terrorism in many places from Algeria to the U.S., and it is mostly feminists from all parts of the world who have led the critique of this growing problem globally. Nevertheless, only when it became convenient for military purposes to discuss the rights of Afghan women did the issues of women and fundamentalism surface in the mainstream media. However, this discussion has not been extended to the rights of women in other conflicts, and non-Islamic fundamentalist attacks on women like those happening in Gujarat, India are not being highlighted. Thus, what could have led to an examination of threats to women's human rights posed by political fundamentalism, terrorism, and armed conflict in many guises was used instead by the U.S. and other western powers to demonize the "Islamic other" and to justify more militarization of society.

The justification of fighting against "terrorism," has been used to curtail human rights both in the U.S. and elsewhere. It has also led to an increase in defense budgets in many countries over the past year from the U.S. and Israel to Colombia and the Philippines. Meanwhile the donor countries pledges at the recent UN Financing for Development World Conference (March 2002) fell far short of what is needed to even begin to fulfill the

millennium goals for advancing human security. Thus, human security as a guiding global principle is far from being embraced as a replacement for the nationalist security paradigm.

Since September 11th, governments in all parts of the world have used terrorism as an excuse to jettison commitment to some human rights in the name of fighting terrorism or providing for national or public "security." Thus, the newly gained recognition of women's rights as human rights, including rape as a war crime, which is not yet deeply entrenched, is jeopardized by the current rise in militaristic national security discourse and the accompanying eclipse in commitment to human rights. The need for articulating an approach to global security that ensures human rights and human security for all is more urgent than ever in the post September 11th world.

**Women's Role in Peace-Building**

One of the areas in which there is the greatest agreement among feminists is about the gendered character of war, militarism, and armed conflict and the harm it causes women. Even where there is considerable diversity in the construction of sex roles, what is remarkable is the way in which war still operates in very specific gendered ways, and military forces use and rely on women as critical parts of the war process even as they privilege masculinity. In short, gender matters to war makers and what happens to women is not just an accidental byproduct of war or biology. Nowhere is this clearer than in the violence that women experience in war and conflict.

Since militarism is clearly gendered and women are victimized by war, does this mean that women are more peaceful or that peace is feminine? Images of women advocating for peace as those who are more nurturing and non-violent abound from the early twentieth century to the Madres of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina or the Russian Mother's movement. While such images may serve a useful purpose for women in a particular time or place—particularly when these are the only roles in which society gives them legitimacy, they pose a number of problems for feminists claiming equality and agency. Since the human species has experienced so many centuries of social construction of roles based on gender, especially in relation to war, it is probably not possible to determine conclusively whether such traits are inherently biological or not. Therefore, rather than trying to prove or disprove a biological argument, it is more useful to look at the issue of what women bring to peace-building in other ways.

Women play many roles in armed conflict—not only as peacemakers or victims but also as perpetrators and supporters of war. There is a growing body of work addressing the complexity of women's relationships to war and militarism (e.g., Moser and Clark; Enloe; Turshen and Twagiramariya). Too many women commit acts of violence and support men who do so, whether in war or in the family, to say that women as a group are innately non-violent. However, it is also true that men commit the vast majority of acts of violence in the world, both against other men and against women and children—as armed forces, agents of the state and in the private sphere. Therefore it would also be absurd to claim that women and men are equally violent, or that women as a group do not have any proclivities toward resolution of conflicts non-violently—at least within the constraints of a patriarchal world where gender roles equate "manhood" with toughness under fire and female violence is generally discouraged.

While not all men are violent nor all women peaceful, a world structured by gender has produced real differences in how most men and most women experience war and violence—both as victims and as perpetrators. These gender differences are further complicated by the particularities of each culture and community, making universal generalizations about them difficult, but this does not make "women" as a political category useless. As Cynthia Enloe observes:

> To avoid seeing all women as natural allies simply because they are women, then, is crucial for building reliable causal analyses and for crafting effective strategies. However, arriving at this conclusion does not require a person to lose all confidence in the belief that "women" is an authentic political category useful in making sense of the causes and consequences of militarization. (297)

Women peace activists have made creative use of women as a constituency to have significant impact on ending armed conflicts and have courageously intervened between groups of warring men, from Ethiopia and Somalia to South Asia. Having different life experiences than men means that women bring different issues to the table and bring awareness of different needs and different possible solutions to the process. A number of studies have begun to document the specific ways in which women generally have a more cooperative and less hierarchical approach to solving problems and are more inclusive in bringing others into the process, which can lead to giving more people a stake in the peace agreements and compromises reached (Anderlini; Boulding; Cockburn; Moser and Clark).

The recognition of women's rights as human rights is jeopardized by the rise in militaristic national security discourse and the accompanying eclipse in commitment to human rights.

While women should be part of all aspects of peace processes because of the specific life experiences and perspectives they bring to the table, we must be aware that women are not all the same. Since women's lives are affected by their race, ethnicity, class, religion, history and culture and other factors, as well as gender, it is important to ensure that women are more than a token presence and that those involved represent diversity in background. From the research that has been done, having more women involved in decision-making does usually matter in the results that will be achieved especially if a critical mass of at least 30-35 per cent is reached. However, it also matters where those women come from, what their commitment is to women's rights, and what are their overall politics.

The need for women to be part of all aspects of the peace-building process should be self-evident and does not rest on claims to their being innately more peaceful. This is a right that rests on the simple but profound principles of justice and democracy. As half or more of humanity, women have the right to be part of the decision-making on all critical activities that deeply affect their lives. Gender balance, as a democratic principle, should apply to the full range of peace-building activities.

**Women's Peace Activism**

Women's activism around peace takes many forms, often depending on a group's politics as well as its values and life circumstances. In looking at examples of such activism, a variety of dilemmas and questions that feminists concerned with peace face are raised: Are feminists pacifists or do we believe in just wars and liberation struggles? Does holding military forces accountable to the rules of war and integrating women into military forces only strengthen them and reinforce social acceptance of military solutions? Do mother's movements necessarily reinforce gender stereotypes? What actions can feminists take when society is polarized around male defined or nationalistic options none of which we want to support? How do feminists who usually create non-formal and often marginal ways of working for peace get taken seriously in the formal peace-making processes?

One of the most significant forms of feminist peace organizing in the last two decades is embodied in efforts by women to cross national and ethnic lines and reach out to women of the "other" side, as well as to critique their own government or community's position. The issues of nationalism or communalism can be difficult for feminists. Some may feel that their own community oppresses women, but they may still be torn by loyalties to that community in the face of its domination by other forces or simply by virtue of being part of it. The nationalist/communitarian forces will certainly pressure or even try to force women to be loyal, often as symbols of the culture. In some cases, women feel that being a fighter for their group can be a way to prove themselves as political actors with agency. However, for women to play a significant role in ending conflict usually requires standing aside and being critical of nationalism, or at least of how the warring parties are manipulating it. There are a number of examples of women's peace initiatives that have taken this step—in Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Mali, the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, and across the India-Pakistan border—to name a few. Central to such efforts is women's rejection of the nationalist project of dividing groups along racial/ethnic, religious, and/or cultural lines and dehumanizing "the other." In refusing this logic, activists often face violence, repression, or rejection from members of their own communities for being traitors.

Let me end with a few comments about women's global networking for peace. International solidarity has played an important role in sustaining many feminist peace activists, especially when they challenge the dominant nationalist or communalist discourse. Women have supported each other through keeping lines of communication open and accurate information flowing, with money and care packets, with counseling and hand holding, with assistance in escaping difficult situations and finding asylum, with petitions to governments, the UN, and other bodies. Global networking has also achieved a number of important gains in relation to war and armed conflict at the international level.

In the past decade, women's efforts at the UN have led to more attention to women and armed conflict, which became a full chapter of the Beijing *Platform for Action* and received considerable attention at the Beijing Plus Five Review in 2000. Women raised the profile of sexual violence in war in the Ad Hoc Tribunals on the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda and made certain that issues of gender-based violence and persecution were incorporated into the Statute of the International Criminal Court. Another major breakthrough was the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in October of 2000, which mandates the inclusion of women in all of the peace processes as well as gender mainstreaming into all these activities. The dilemma posed by global networking at the UN is how to ensure that such gains are not simply rhetorical, and that they are implemented effectively in a gender and culture specific way at all levels.

This leads back to the importance of making sure that *women's peace activism is both local and global,* and that the dynamic tension between the universality and specificity of this work is recognized and grappled with continuously. Only through such a process can women's peace activism not only respond to the needs of each situation but also impact the larger global structures creating many of these conflicts so that we can move toward a pro-active vision of positive peace with human rights and human security at its core, rather than continue to be called upon

to clean up after the endless succession of male determined armed conflicts.

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**JOANNA M. WESTON**

## Grandmother's Cradle

I take bark from branch and trunk
fashion a cradle
and weave blankets of animal fur
picked from low shrubs

here I lie warm
to hold children
deep in my body
for release into summer

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