

*International Consultation
On Women as Peacemakers*

DAUGHTERS OF WAR, WOMEN FOR PEACE

By Pi Villanueva

"What would happen if six women were negotiating for peace instead of the six male politicians from the former Yugoslavia?" a journalist asked an old woman in a bombed out village.

"There would not have been a war in the first place if women were running the place."

The story is told by Zorica Trifunovic, a tourism worker turned peace activist from Belgrade in the former Yugoslavia. True or not, the story may well sum up the sentiments of Zorica and 13 other women from various conflict areas who met at the Ateneo University in the Philippines last May 29-June 2, 1995 to share their experiences and insights about war and peacemaking. This gathering was timed in preparation for the Beijing Conference in September this year. In the public forum called Gender and Peace, held on the last day of International Consultation, the participants highlighted the experiences of women in situations of armed conflict. What emerges from their stories is the reality of gender dimension in both war and peacemaking.

GENDER DIMENSION IN WAR

The experience of war is different for women and men. War, with its phallic-inspired symbols and glorification of the "male virtues" of physical strength, bravery, pride and gallantry, is a male preserve. It is not a historical accident that all military establishments are entirely male. Trained to respect hierarchies and to follow, and become authority figures, men thrive in war situations where the individual is subject to the triumphalist calls for collective unity, sacrifice, and victory at all cost.

In war, men do the bloodletting. Women, the bleeding. Ging Deles, executive director of the Philippine-based Gaston Z. Ortigas Peace Institute, one of the sponsors of the International Consultation enumerated the direct effects of war on women in her paper presentation entitled "Women, War, and Peacemaking." These are economic dislocation, intense sense of insecurity, sexual harassment and assault, breakdown of traditional social structures, and weakening of women's organizations.

Men of course are also victims of war. Foot soldiers are cannon fodder and pawns in the war games of vain glorious empire-seekers. But the participants in the International Consultation chose to highlight the particular ways in which women suffer as

SPECIAL FEATURES

WOMEN
AND
PEACE



"WOMEN IN BLACK", FOR FIVE YEARS, PROTESTING THE OCCUPATION

women in situations of armed conflict. There is something in war, they say, that makes women's oppression and exploitation seem more acute.

For one, the treatment of women as sex objects is magnified in war situations. The experience of the "comfort women" of the Japanese Imperial Army, for example, is not a special phenomena but part of a long and continuing history of turning women into sex slaves. Women are, after all, the property of men, to be defended if they belong to one's camp, and to be ravaged and put up for ransom if they belong to the enemy. In Burma, for example, women from the minority nationalities are being forced by the army of the Burman majority to be their porters during the day, and their sex slaves at nighttime.

Far from being a behavioral excess, wartime rape is a conscious and systematic act. In the case in Bosnia, Rwanda, and in earlier conflicts like the India-Pakistan-Bangladesh border clashes, rape has been used as a strategy for "ethnic cleansing." Rape in this sense is not only a violation of one woman, but is considered a grave and final insult to the whole ethnic group. Many women who are assaulted in this way either die from the violence of the rape or by the hands of their own relatives out to defend the honor of the clan or tribe.

Another impact of war on women is the intensification of their double burden; women have to work more in war situations. Women are conscripted to the factories and fields to keep the war machine humming and the food supply flowing. Yet, they are still expected to fulfill their task to keep the fort safe, hearth warm, and home and "virtue" intact.

Even when whole communities are scattered into refugee camps and herded into hamlets, it is the women who are tasked to keep together whoever and whatever is left, according to Shanti Satchithanandam of Sri Lanka and Bola Olufunwa of the London-based Akina Mamawa Akrika who are both working with women refugees of war. In forced migration, women, according to Shanti, also suffer more than the men because they are more rooted in their environment. "I have seen women in refugee camps who were traumatized by the very fact that they were separated from their family, their home, their neighbors, and their lettuce garden. And there is no effect on men," said Shanti who is a convener of the multi-sector-based National Peace Council in Sri Lanka and a program officer of the Community Aid Abroad.

Even as combatants or army reservists, women suffer as women in war situations. In Israel where women are given military training and arms to defend the state, the attritious war against the Arab world has slowly chipped away the early victories of women. Ariella Friedman, a doctor of psychology from Israel recalled coming home in 1967 from her studies in the United States to an Israel dramatically changed by the war. "We all began with the idea of the equality between men and women, but the years of war have led to the lessening of the status of women," Ariella said.

In war, women are told to close ranks for nation, tribe, clan, or movement because dissent can be exploited by the enemy. "In a time of conflict, to talk against our men and their oppression of women is seen as weakening the cause or the fight for national identity," Ariella lamented. "Many women have been forced to toe this line by pain of isolation, if not death. Ariella cited the peace group of Arab-Israeli women called El Fanar whose members are being harassed and threatened to be killed because of their active campaign against the murder of Arab women who are accused by the

community of having brought dishonor to family and tribe.

Because war or the use of arms to settle conflicts reduces complex issues like resource scarcity, identity, power or ideology into a contest of military superiority, women are left with conflicting feelings about their being women and their being members of a particular tribe or nation. "I know of some women who are active in the peace groups who do not want to be identified with feminism. They say 'we're for peace but do not push us into feminism'," recounted Ariella.

RESISTANCE

Women have always been pictured as victims of war, and indeed they are. Mass consciousness is awash with the image of women, often with a small child in tow, fleeing from a war zone. But the participants in the International Consultation also showed how women, despite the hostile environment and attitudes towards peace activism, are resisting not only war's impact on their lives, but war itself and its ill-logic.

Tanya Gallegher who is as old as the current civil war in Northern Ireland recounted the efforts of Mairead MacGuire and her colleagues to build grassroots organizations for peace, an effort which won for them the Nobel Peace Prize in the 1970s. She took issue with the way many men in her country belittle women's peace efforts. "The men they say: 'well you already tried that, but it didn't work, now did it?'"

In Israel, women who protest against the war are dismissed outright. "Women are told that yes, your feelings are understandable but state decisions can not be guided by how you feel," Ariella said.

Zorica, who is a member of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, recounted how in her country it was a group of women who first called attention to the dangers of extreme nationalism and ethnic pride. The women in the former Yugoslavia, said Zorica, were also the first to form peace groups, and the first to defy the government ban on peace demonstrations.

Ela Gandhi, a grandniece of the Mahatma and a member of parliament and treasurer of the African National Congress Women's League, recounted the perseverance of the women in the anti-apartheid movement in demanding that women be made part of the peace process in South Africa. Their efforts, said Ela, have somehow paid off. In the post-apartheid Parliament, 100 of its 400 members are women.

In the Philippines, women, according to Ging Deles, are the backbone of the peace movement because they provide the important but often "invisible" backstop work and secretariat function in most of the campaigns and activities. Ging, however, lamented the fact that very few women are in strategic positions in the peace process. The negotiating panels, for instance of all the contending parties in the current peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the communist and Moro insurgencies are dominated by men.

Palestinian and Israeli women, according to Ariella are also defying political and cultural restrictions on speaking out against their respective nation's "just war." She cited the Women in Black, a group of Palestinian women in Israel who stand for two hours every week along major city streets, covered from head to toe in black cloth and silently holding placards that say "Stop the Occupation." "The women (in black) are using symbols that are usually used against them for protest," Ariella said.

WOMEN AS PEACEBUILDERS

Women, according to the participants of the International Consultation, make good peacebuilders. According to Ging Deles, women have a longer perspective about peace and war because they know that peace is a necessary condition for bringing up their children. Women, because of their role as housekeepers, are also more attuned to conserving and judiciously using resources and this gives them a different view of what matters and should matter. This inclination of women towards peace because of their traditional role as primary care-givers is dramatically captured in the words of Olive Schreiner (1911):

"There is, perhaps, no woman, whether she has born children, or be merely a potential child bearer, who could look down on a battlefield covered with the slain, but the thought would rise in her. 'So many mothers' sons! So many bodies brought into the world to lie there! So many months of weariness and pain while bones and muscles were shaped within; ...so many baby mouths drawing life at woman's breasts; --all this, that men might lie with glazed eyeballs and swollen bodies, and fixed, blue unclosed mouths, and great limbs tossed --this, that an acre of ground might be manured with human flesh!'"

The capacity of women to be good peacebuilders stems from the very conditions of marginalization and invisibility in which they have been forced.

Because they have been shut out of the power centers and the competition inside these centers, women have less emotional baggage and are more inclined to work out a compromise even in difficult situations. Their marginalization gives women a distinct perspective of power and conflict which enables them to act and speak out with less consideration for the status quo. "Women are freer to recognize the peace solution and not to be afraid to work for it," Ariella declared.

The participants in the International Consultation may have stressed the particular characteristics of women as peacebuilders, but they also addressed the question of women's role in the perpetuation of structures and values that sustain and perpetuate war. After all, women are often the transmitter of values and social codes within the family. In the document which they signed at the end of the Consultation, the participants resolved to "further the cause of peace" not only in the national and international levels, but also at the level of the home. They also raised the issue of women's part in the running and maintenance of the war industry and military establishment. In fact, one of the consensus points in the Consultation is a call for "dramatic action(s) to withdraw women workers in (the) war industry, and to condemn war firms."

The International Consultation ended with a declaration of the participants to further strengthen and intensify their peacebuilding efforts. They also resolved to carry the peace agenda to the Beijing Conference and beyond.▲

WHAT DID THE MEN DO?

Even in situations wherein family members are dispersed and whole communities are sundered, the gendered roles of men and women persist. Shanti recounts her experience with women refugees in her country:

"In 1992 there was complete devastation in the eastern province. In one area, the military during their flushing out operation against the militants were also killing villagers as they moved on. Villages along a 50 kilometer stretch were affected. On the eighth month every person, dog and cat had evacuated the villages and sought refuge in the jungles. These people were very poor--most people affected in war are the poor, women and children--and had no means, no savings, no skills for employment. The women built temporary shelters. They went to these fields and collected grains of palay and organized a community kitchen. They cooked for their people and looked after their children. Snakebites were rampant because it was a rainy season and when the rain comes, the snakes also come out searching for a higher ground. To have other food stuffs, the women sold some of their palay grains and bought corn which they planted and harvested. What did the men do? Well the men had certain responsibilities too. They brought the Red Cross people. Once, they caught a wild boar which the women cooked."

