

## Common Goals, Stark Differences: Peace and Justice in Women's Contexts

**A**s we enter 2000, peace must be ranking high in the wish-list of millions of people who find the least relevance in the much-ballyhooed millennium bug. In a world continuously ravaged by territorial disputes, conflicts over resources, battles for ethnic self-determination and religious primacy, and growing nuclearisation and militarism, peace remains elusive. A prayer for peace is repeated in many homes where women cannot soundly sleep, not only for fear of being hit by bullet shrapnel and bombs, but by blows and other abuses from intimate partners and male family members who add to the violence that many women experience day in and day out.

The wish for peace comes with the yearning for justice. The prevailing social injustice experienced by marginalised sectors, and the people's struggle to challenge oppressive forces and structures underscore why peace cannot prosper where injustice reigns.

Women. Peace. Justice. Words that when put together conjure images of women acting as mediators, pacifiers, healers, peaceweavers. Women as agents of peace and non-violence. Are these roles socially prescribed as well? What does this make of women who choose to engage in armed struggle to achieve liberation from oppressive forces and structures? How then do we view women who join peacekeeping troops as combatants, rather than as medical staff, in the belief that this is their contribution to peace-making? Will women's presence in the army—state or rebel—transform the conduct of war?

Some women have taken the parliamentary route toward influencing the peace agenda. In Europe, some women members of parliament are pushing for women's involvement at all levels of the peace process, especially in decision-making, and for integration of a gender perspective in peace-building and reconstruction efforts.

But there must be caution in conflating female embodiment with representation of people's interests or women's interests. Sri Lan-

ka's two top posts are occupied by women (President Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Bandaranaike), for example, and people have pinned their hopes on the two to solve the ethnic conflict that has claimed thousands of lives for decades. However, President Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Bandaranaike themselves appear to have opted to uphold party and class interests that have stood in the way of decisively addressing discrimination against Tamils.

In remote regions in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, a growing number of women have taken bold steps in putting an end to ethnic divides that have devastated their lives. Quietly, but determinedly, they have begun reaching out and dialoguing with women from other ethnic groups in an attempt to build solidarity rather than exacerbate enmity.

This issue of *Women in Action* underscores the continued absence of peace and social justice, as well as the ways women have taken to intervene, albeit in still limited spaces, toward rejecting and changing this reality: Roshmi Goswami discusses the impact of armed conflict on women in North East India and their exclusion from conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction; Sunila Abeysekera tackles the continued discrimination against the Tamils in Sri Lanka; Carla Bianpoen presents the groundswell in the Indonesian women's resistance spurred by the economic and political crisis; Melody Kemp analyses the roles of women warriors, past and present, and challenges the prevailing notion of women as peacekeepers; Mithi Laya shares why Filipino women have joined the underground New People's Army and tensions around gender issues in the revolutionary army.

We invite you, dear readers, to share your vision, views and initiatives in building peace and fighting social injustice.