

Introduction: Promoting Gender Equity and the Culture of Peace

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*If I could weave Peace into the fabric of the world,
I would stitch flowers onto its hem, and shake it over the earth, and say,
“there, now, rest.”*
Suzanne Stuttmann¹

The advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice. . . . Empowerment of women and equality between women and men are prerequisites for achieving political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security among all peoples.
Beijing Platform for Action, Paragraph 41.

On May 24, 2004, in the interest of peace, democracy and gender equality, Lehman College of The City University of New York co-sponsored with the International Health Network (IHAN) a daylong symposium on “The Role of Women in Achieving World Peace and the Role of Men and Boys in Gender Equity.” We were honored to welcome several distinguished guest speakers from the worlds of diplomacy and academia, including United Nations Ambassadors Anwarul K. Chowdhury and Olara Otunnu, Dr. Patricia Fernández-Kelly of Princeton University, Dr. Michael Kimmel of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, Dr. Vijaya Melnick of the University of the District of Columbia, and our keynote speaker, Mrs. Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Iranian lawyer, former judge and human rights activist.

One needs only to ask a few questions to see an important link between the two conference themes: Women’s Role in World Peace, on the one hand, and Men and Boys’ Role in Gender Equity, on the other. What are the chances of political stability in nation states where

men and women do not have equal rights and self-determination under the law? If women do not have access to health care, education and decent employment opportunities, if they are excluded from positions of power, authority and political and social influence, are the prospects of violence and instability more likely?

Mrs. Ebadi underscored the crucial role women have always played as peace educators and peacemakers in society. She firmly condemned all forms of terrorism and religious fundamentalism around the globe. She spoke eloquently about the difficulties inherent in societies that seek to promote and sustain peace within, while simultaneously waging war on other societies. While it is easy enough to point to many nations of which this is true, our mandate should be to focus first on acknowledging and rectifying our own shortcomings. Mrs. Ebadi makes an incisive point: one wonders if America's best hope of realizing a peace-loving nation lies in the hands of the caregivers of our society. Who in our culture is better equipped to nourish feelings of security, love and respect for others?

It would be natural to assume that we speak of the women of our society, and certainly this is true to a great degree. Women have historically stood at the forefront of peace processes, as shown by Aristophanes's comedic play *Lysistrata*, presented by the Lehman College Bronx Repertory Company to conclude the symposium. The 411 B.C. play tells the story of a resolute Athenian woman with a bold vision and mission. Weary of the protracted Peloponnesian War, Lysistrata mobilizes the women of Athens in a general sex strike to persuade their warring men to stop the fighting and vote for peace with Sparta. The trick works, and peace is established. Twenty-five centuries later, the play continues to have relevance as women's groups across nations organize sex strikes. Ending a war is better viewed as a metaphor for women organizing peace movements in our modern context, as they have done in the past. Highlighted is the revolutionary idea that an organized group of women can stop conflict and bring about peace, with the compliance/participation of men. In other words, Lysistrata's cry for peace does not mean that the resolution of all conflict and the salvation of the whole world depends solely on women. They are only half of the equation, a useful stabilizing force with tremendous creativity and resourcefulness to motivate political

negotiations, a critical step in conflict resolution. The other half of the equation is men.

Interestingly, social scientists place more emphasis on the importance of social learning, rather than innate, biological gender differences as the determinant of who enacts the caregiving role. Structural and historical changes on a global and national level act as a catalyst for slowly changing traditional roles. Although it is true that most positions of power and prestige are still held by men, and that men have been the driving force behind world politics for time immemorial, the last few generations have seen women gradually assume a much more visible and vocal presence. Women have seen that they have much to gain from increased involvement in national and international affairs. Thus, we have not required much persuasion to venture outside the traditional roles once defined for us by our society. A similar venturing outside traditionally defined social roles on the part of men would contribute greatly toward achieving a more peace-loving culture.

Generations of women have defined themselves in terms of their connectedness to others. We have learned the value of solving a wide range of problems from a relational context, and this has served us well in both our personal and professional worlds. Yet men have been slow to participate in the movement for equality, reluctant to explore the possibilities that lie outside what has become their customary, familiar and often privileged world. Prof. Kimmel suggests that changes in the behaviors and attitudes of men represent the vital next phase of the movement for women's equality. He asserts that these attitudes and behaviors have been the greatest obstacles to women's equality. Understandably, men have had little motivation to make such changes because they do not see how they will benefit; they fear the loss of privilege and advantage. They must come to see that increased gender equality is in their interest as well. As usefully stated in the *Beijing Platform for Action*, "The advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and should not be seen in isolation as a women's issue. They are the only way to build a sustainable, just and developed society." (paragraph 41) There is, however, much ground to cover before that happens.

Men across cultures have become so accustomed to the personal and professional advantages of being male, to the “unearned” privileges they have accrued through the centuries by virtue of their gender, that many have become blind to it. They believe in the “myth of meritocracy,” that whenever men are advanced over women (or over less-favored men) in the workplace, that it is *always* based on merit. Needless to say, not all women are afforded equal opportunities within and among societies, and not all men are equally privileged. Within societies, masculinity and femininity are constructed differently based on one’s social class, race, ethnicity and age.

Men increasingly say they want less-stressful lives, as well as more meaningful and intimate relationships with their families, particularly with their children. But they are in a bind: they also see their lives as driven by financial need and exigencies. Typically, men face enormous pressure to earn a good enough living to provide for their families and loved ones, to secure promotions in the workplace and to be continuously and gainfully employed without interruption. The consequences of these stresses often lead to depression, loss of self-esteem and doubts about their manhood. Men must be persuaded of the imperative of redefining the notion of masculinity to realize that giving up privilege will actually make it possible for them to lead the kinds of lives they say they want. A shift in the gender balance would help make it possible for them to fulfill their potentials, maximize their choices in life and gain self-respect.

Clearly then, the larger political, economic and social structure that supports this gender dichotomy must also change. Wage differentials exact an emotional price from men as well as women with regard to the stresses and strains of role expectations, a price that could be greatly reduced by a policy of “equal pay for equal work.” Men must feel free to share domestic responsibilities, such as childcare and housework, without risking their professional positions, and we need the kind of government services, programs and entitlements that support and benefit not only individual family systems but also society as a whole. For example, paid maternity leave, “flex-time” and job sharing are still rare in the United States; and family-leave legislation, when enacted, is unpaid. In contrast, European countries such as Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden have institutionalized

policies and programs, such as family-leave and family-linked working time patterns, that support the importance of balancing work and family responsibilities. In his discussion paper “Striking the Balance: Women, Men, Work and Family,” Australia’s Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward stresses the federal government’s appeal to Australian men to get them more involved in the unpaid work burden.

Thus, it is not just men who must be persuaded, but society as a whole. Social structures must become more flexible to support the changes required for true gender equity. For example, in order to maintain a stable and well-organized society, the larger social order invests power in men in the arenas that place them in control of society’s economic and political institutions, and invests women with responsibilities in the private sphere. Dr. Fernández-Kelly points out that in capitalist societies, gender dictates fundamental economic processes that determine the allocation of labor into remunerated and non-remunerated spheres of production, with unremunerated labor being designated almost solely to women. Thus, a highly industrialized society like the United States gains from the gender division of labor.

Women have become undervalued and hidden laborers who reproduce the labor power that turns the wheels of capitalism. Professor Fernández-Kelly draws our attention to the connection between a global “gendered” division of labor with her example of Mexico’s *maquiladoras*. The new economic arrangements that followed globalization did not help men and women meet the demands of paid work and work at home, especially the care of children as she suggests. The new global economy was designed to profit the capitalist system and the ones who profit from that system.

By examining critical indicators of gender inequity, Dr. Melnick illustrates women’s lower access to society’s resources and opportunities. She points to the gender disparities in many parts of the world regarding fetal and infant mortality, nutrition and health care, access to education, access to special opportunities, ownership of property and division of labor. Globally women are marginalized, have low or no political voices, and often end up having less or lower

access to goods and services within their own societies and through international agencies. Therefore, as Dr. Melnick points out, the emancipation women deserve and need has far-reaching consequences not only for women and nations but also for the world as a whole.

Ambassador Chowdhury reports that in the last few years, governments and international organizations have increasingly come to recognize the importance of gender equality in the continuing struggle for democracy and human rights. An equitable advancement and involvement of both men and women is a foundation for a sustainable culture of peace, which entails “respect for life, for human beings and their dignity, and for all human rights, as well as justice, solidarity, tolerance and understanding” (UNESCO International Year for the Culture of Peace, 2000). He also calls attention to the fact, however, that women’s interests by and large have been neglected in the peace process in most countries, resulting in male-centered approaches to peace and security. He points out that although recent work has noted the connection between war and masculinity, the role of women continues to be fertile ground for new and creative solutions to violence (see Braudy, 2005).

We have long been aware that women have been combating domestic violence on the battlegrounds of their own homes for countless generations. Ambassadors Chowdhury and Otunnu both call us to broaden our awareness to include the tragic and inhumane ways in which women and children are victimized by war on both a national and an international scale. Women are raped and brutalized as instruments of male aggression and used as political pawns in the struggle for dominance and control. Their words are a call to awaken individuals to the importance of local initiatives, while at the same time forging collaborative movements on a global level. Both are necessary and important elements of the monitoring and reporting campaign to protect the rights and well-being of women and children exposed to armed conflict.

Ambassador Otunnu further calls attention to the importance of “normative” tools of advocacy, the enforcement of community values and the power of collective influence in combating violence and protecting war-affected children—the next generation of peace or

war makers. He reports on the practices of millions of children exploited by soldiers, spies and porters as sex slaves; subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence in combat zones; killed or maimed by landmines every day. How could we expect a peaceful future for the world if children of today, the men and women of tomorrow, are experiencing brutalizing acts of violence in their everyday lives?

Both Ambassador Chowdhury and Prof. Kimmel point out that historically, boys and men have been socialized to express their frustration and feelings of helplessness in competitive and aggressive terms. Gender roles are socially constructed phenomena and society needs to shift from competitive to cooperative gender models. Thus, we must examine cultural norms, values and customs that impact on gender-related behavior to explain the links between masculinity and violence, and seek solutions. Once again, men/society are/is challenged to redefine masculinity and teach boys, through practice, that being male does not mean practicing violence.

In advocating for world peace, one must begin at home by promoting a more peace-loving society in which both genders are valued equally; in which men as well as women develop the ability to nourish feelings of security, love and respect for others. To overcome the obstacles that prevent greater momentum in the movement for gender equality, we must examine not only the attitudes of specific genders but also social, political and economic policies. Gender equality holds out a promise of peace that begins in individual families and slowly spreads throughout our communities, our nations and, ultimately, our world. Perhaps Ambassador Chowdhury stated it most succinctly. “Sustainable peace is inseparable from gender equality.” It is thus crucial to promote greater inclusiveness among women and men, among girls and boys, to build cross-gender solidarity, a prerequisite for a culture of peace. Gender equity is instrumental to shaping new forms of leadership and democratic institutions that will promote a culture of peace.

Notes

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