



PeaceWomen Across the Globe
FRIEDENSFRAUEN WELTWEIT
نساء من أجل السلام عبر العالم
Femmes de Paix Autour du Monde
Женщины мира за мир на земле
MUJERES DE PAZ EN EL MUNDO
Mulheres pela Paz ao redor do Mundo

DONNE DI PACE NEL MONDO

ピースウーマン—国境を越え平和をつくる女たち
全球和平妇女

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Hope for Peace Embedded in the Ordinary – PeaceWomen’s Teaching without Teaching

Note: The following essay was one of three that originally appeared in Chinese in the journal Dushu (Reading) based in Beijing, October 2005 issue about the PeaceWomen project.

Mahatma Gandhi says, an eye for an eye, and we will all go blind. Hatred, greed, calculation and jealousy work like a plague, inflicting more and more people with the curse of violent passions that reduce them to blindness and stupidity.

Jose Saramago, 1998 Nobel Literary Prize Laureate, tells in his novel *Blindness* of how blindness induces further and greater blindness: an unknown virus spreads in the city, the affected fall all of a sudden into blindness, «seeing» only a thick whiteness. People in contact with the affected quickly contract the virus, and doctor, thief, policeman, family ... one after another gets sent into the isolation camp. In the camp, the «equality» and «empathy» brought by the onslaught of the disease can only be transient. Robberies, bullies, lies and cruelties rule and oppress this space with greater force. After a while, no one watches over or cares for the camp, because everyone in the city has gone blind. Knowing that no-one is watching, almost everyone loses their discipline; robberies, bullies, lies and cruelties used to be intolerable to the eye now rule the hearts. Only, one single person not having gone blind – the good wife of the doctor – witnesses how the violence of blind obsessions breeds more blind obsessions and violences, accumulating into a torrent flushing all sentiments of kindness, forgiving and giving down the drain.

Violence is a messenger from the kingdom of death and closure. Driven by an obsession dominated by unknown fear and fathomless greed, violence gnaws at the freedom of the heart, at the wisdom and courage that make possible kindness, forgiving and giving. In a world dominated by violence, «peace» becomes one main axis for protracting the system constructed by violence, enabling the game of destruction perpetrated by violence to be procrastinated until its underlying logic of ultimate self-destruction is caught in the showdown of self-confrontation. To break the curse of violence, «peace» must be freed from the system, so that the perspectives and experiences repressed by the violence-constructed system can come into play to bring the hope of peace to humanity.

The twentieth century ended in violence and blindness.

The First World War used air-bombers invented only a decade ago. The mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Second World War declared the flamboyant victory of military science and technology. Wolfgang Sachs, ecologist, talks about the United Nations Charter adopted on 4 May 1945:



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«The project to banish violence and war from the face of the earth was clearly linked to the vision of mankind marching forward and upward along the road of progress ... The utopian intention aimed at a world of individuals who follow only the voice of reason ... The utopia of mankind ... was united ... under the rule of science, market and the state ... [T]he traditional notion that peace would be the fruit of justice had lost ground. It gave way to the expectation that peace would be the result of mankind reunited under the achievements of civilization.» This means that the multiplicity of cultures in space is interpreted as a succession of stages in time, and the «savage» (or so-called backward, underdeveloped, or developing) is to grow up and enter the stage of civilization and peace with the guidance of the West. «And indissolubly linking the hope for peace to this world-shaking endeavour leads to a tragic dilemma – the pursuit of peace implies the annihilation of diversity, while seeking diversity implies the outburst of violence. The dilemma is unlikely to be resolved without delinking peace from progress and progress from peace.»¹

E. F. Schumacher, economist renowned for his profound idea of «small is beautiful», says in an essay «The Root of Violence» that «The Bomb is the symbol of modern civilisation. Unfortunately, it is not merely a symbol but an ever-present threat to all life on our planet, yet it is also a symbol of a civilisation that has bred readiness for violence without any limit whatsoever ... Detached, objective thought, always liable to error, opens the door to unlimited violence because it eliminates the countervailing power of the heart. A civilisation which deprecates the heart, which idolizes objectivity in the forms of scientism, positivism, and rationalism, which bases its entire education on the notion that decisions must be taken without interference from the emotions, inevitably exposes itself to the dangers of unlimited violence... The concepts of non-violence would be Reverence for Life; religious 'Praise'; humility; measure, in the sense of knowing where to stop; and an irresistible need for justice... [They] derive from hearts that are strong enough to control the mind.»²

The twenty-first century draws its curtain in violence and blindness.

Visible and invisible violence assaults us head-on with the violence at once remote and near, real and virtual. We are almost dumbstruck for any response.

Images of the 9-11 plane crash into the twin towers and people jumping out from high floors transmitted on TV seem no different from Hollywood disaster thrillers; the film *Hotel Rwanda* represents the horror of 800,000 deaths in three months of ethnic strife in Rwanda; USA bombers on missions to Iraq take on board journalists who transmit city-bombed-mission-completed images like virtual video games; on the internet one can witness «live broadcast» of Iraqi masked gunmen's flick of the knife and the rolling head of a hostage. On the other hand, every day in the world, the 30,000 children dying from starvation and curable diseases are but a number, a number removed of shock or sorrow, though 30,000 children are dying every day.

«Profound» experiences that evoke in us shock, fear, anxiety and trepidation are more and more founded on our ignorance about the evils shaping our daily lives. Our ignorance, however, is proportionate to the «knowing» constructed by the information era. The more we come to «know», the more impoverished our experience is, and what is «profound» cannot be immediate to our experience.

¹ Wolfgang Sachs, «One World», *The Development Dictionary*, London and New York: Zed, 1992, pp.103–105.

² E. F. Schumacher, «The Roots of Violence», *This I Believe and Other Essays*, New Delhi: Viveka, 2003, pp. 189–193.

An-eye-for-an-eye violence seems justified, yet unacceptable. The injustice of the powerful does not automatically endow the oppressed with greater justice. One does not embody justice simply because one's opponent is evil. Violent revenge of the vulnerable more often than not offers the oppressor more pretexts for the abuse of violence, further tilting the balance of power against the vulnerable. Yet, does resisting violence mean resisting revolution and resisting change? Does this mean compelling the weak to muted tolerance and reluctant acceptance of the status quo? Does embracing violence mean promoting revolution and promoting change? Can one thus disarm the powerful and the strong? How can one come out of the vicious circle of violence, effectively promote social justice, deepen social revolution, and enable the ordinary people to be free from helplessness, hopelessness, cynicism and inferiority when confronted with apparently endless, fathomless violence and catastrophe? How can words like «development» and «progress» no longer camouflage exploitation and plunder?

Beyond the information based on ignorance that the mainstream media transmit, beyond the logic of the powerful propagated by dazzling violence, if we can hear and touch the beatings of life that are nurtured by sympathy, congeniality, mutuality and reciprocity, with which we can dissipate the loneliness and obsession of modern rational monologue, then, we can see, that in daily life which is not glamorous or momentous, that in apparently endless, fathomless suffering, distress, pain and misery, there is amazing wisdom and courage of living, there is unyielding perseverance and spiritual strength and creativity of affection.

Ruth Gaby Vermot-Mangold, member of Swiss parliament and European Council, initiator of the project 1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005, has, with humanitarian concerns, visited war and conflict devastated areas such as Armenia, Bosnia and Kosovo. However, she finds that the Europeans living in ease and comfort, instead of being proud of their aid patronage to the refugees, have a lot to learn from the numerous women who have demonstrated their strong will to live amidst disaster situations. She feels that whether it is in the devastation before and after wars, or in the strenuous torture of unending poverty, what helps communities to survive is not state leaders, political elites or rich businessmen (who are more often than not the culprits depriving the ordinary people from minimal living conditions), but unknown, ordinary women who have persisted in apparently weak but actually amazingly determined efforts. Gaby thought, the best commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the 1995 World Conference on Women is to present to the world the extraordinary work of tens of thousands of ordinary women, so that the world can see where hope is, so that the world can pay tribute to the women and their work. Let 1000 women represent tens of thousands of women across the globe to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005!

Thus, starting in 2003 there have been activities across the globe to search for and illuminate the extraordinary work of ordinary women. In most places, this project has not caught the eye of the mainstream media, has not lifted the eyebrows of the elite, has not found grace with foundations, sponsors or governmental or non-governmental organizations. Why? Because in the «modern» society mainstreamed with the mind and practice of currying favour with the powerful, gratifying the rich, revering the successful, and calculating every move by projecting the returns, even if there is an interest in Cinderella, the interest is in one single person who has the right feet to put on the right pair of glass slippers and turn herself into a queen. There is no interest in the tens of thousands of ordinary women, clothed in grey, clad with straw sandals, un-catching to the eye, working in remote areas, among marginalized groups, with AIDS patients, criminals, orphans, and victims of poverty and all sorts of violence, sweating and struggling, without calculating the results or returns. These women usually do not draw attention, but when they do, it is either ridicule for being remote from the affairs of the world

that «matter» and for acting like a mantis trying to stop a chariot, or retaliation for their determined spirits and efforts are seen as stumbling blocks infringing on the big interests of the powerful.

Nevertheless, the vision and concept of the project have been taken on by practitioners at the ground level as well as people in search of alternatives. Based on a simple dream and faith, the project has flowered despite a stringent budget and an immense difficulty in communication. After a process of inviting nominations, cross checking of identity and information, screening and recommendation by local and regional advisory committees, and discussion and selection by an international committee, finally, a list of 1000 women symbolizing the efforts of tens of thousands of women was submitted to the Oslo Nobel Peace Prize Committee in January 2005 to contest for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005. The 1000 come from over 150 countries, aged from twenties to eighties, work in areas from community harmony to ethnic reconciliation, from self-reliant livelihood to ecological conservation, from gender equity to empowerment of vulnerable groups, from culture and art to education, religion and beliefs ... In all areas, we find radiant ordinary women whose deeds are so inspiring that they are teaching without teaching with their inexhaustible care for others around them, with their love, uncontainable by any calculation, sustaining their unyielding commitment to the protection of lives around them. It is impossible not to be affected by them, for vibrating through space and time, in the traces of their blood and tears, there is the knowing smile of fighting for dignity and happiness for themselves and for others.

Among the 1000, 108 are from the China region. On August 27, at the conference room of the Joint Publishers in Beijing, 21 PeaceWomen gathered; they told their own stories, heard others' stories, at one time shedding tears at the wounds of injustices, at another time breaking into laughter at the ludicrous idiocies and mediocrities. The vibrations of compassion at the gathering cannot be conveyed by words, yet I would still like to make a few quotes:

Xie Lihua: «In various awards activities, I often appeal for appreciation of the contributions of rural women in China which is a country with the majority population being rural. Yet very few rural women ever get awards. This time, I am particularly delighted to see that 15 out of the 81 peacewomen from mainland China are rural women working on the ground. This shows the importance the project has given to the contributions of grassroots women.»

Xu Fengxiang: «I find this project remarkable. Globally, it is a conceptual breakthrough because in the past, the Nobel Peace Prize was limited to aspects against the war or in politics. We have however given a comprehensive and integrated interpretation to peace. What is peace? It is coexistence in genuine harmony between humans and nature, it is construction of harmony of various aspects of human society. I used to think that other people got the prize as an individual, but we have 1000 nominated as one, so are we just getting an advantage with the numbers? But on further thinking about this, I feel that we are 1000, we represent tens of thousands of women across the globe, we are not an individual, we are a collective, we are not one single mountain, we are a range of mountains. Hence, we must send in our nomination, we must get the award! We women defend peace across the globe, we are quiet and unknown but we are present everywhere. We must tell the stories of women from China, we must tell the stories of women in the whole world.»

Dong Xiuyu: «The significance of this project is not the outcome, but the process. The process enables us women to boost our self esteem and self empowerment. It also offers a good opportunity for women to learn from each other and to continue learning themselves. In the Joint Publishers, people say I am an idealist, and an incurable one. Today, I have heard many of you speak, you are much more than me as incurable idealists. Let us idealists stand fast to our ideals, and fight together for a beautiful, just, ideal society.»

Zhang Shuqin: «I run homes for the uncared-for children of criminals. The kids call me Grandma Zhang, some people call me Director Zhang, but more people call me Beggar Queen. When I first started the children's home, some people called me up and reprimanded me: why don't you help children in the remote mountains or children of martyrs? Why do you help children of criminals? I retorted, China is so big, I can help whoever I want to help, what has it to do with you? I am a simple ordinary citizen, what we are trying to do is to help change the fate of the most vulnerable among vulnerable groups, to help the kids go through the most difficult years when they do not have their parents by their side. We have encountered all sorts of sweet, sour, bitter, spicy times. We are not only idealists, we are pragmatists, we engage in real, actual work. Many people condemn corruption, condemn this and condemn that, but few really undertake to get something done. We have contracted 13 hectares of farmland, we have grown 30,000 date trees; every morning, I take the kids to weeding, for our own survival. At 5 o'clock in the early morning, all kids above 8 years old go to the fields. The food sent to them in the field is plain buns and pickled vegetables. I say to the kids, you have an ill fate, we are poor, and poor children learn to become mature at an early age. We have an infant who was a few months old when his father, a fugitive, was re-captured. For one month, the police could not find a home for the infant, and they sent the infant on to me. At 4am on November 4 last year, at the Fuzhou train station, the infant was handed over to me. On the platform of the train station, holding the 10-month old infant, I gave in to a good cry. Our society has lost kindness and love; what we must recover is the kindness and love of the Chinese people.»

Apparently weak and solitary stories of individuals converge by hundreds and thousands, and from the real tears and laughters of the real struggles of real people living in the real world, there can be nurtured profound, immediate experiences that poke at the fragility of the violence of the powerful, and that illuminate the immense strength in the apparently insignificant, trivial deeds of ordinary people. With this, fear will be dispelled, the heart will be calmed, the eyesight will be lucid and discerning, and the curse of violence and blindness will be broken.

I do not have the lavish wish that the Nobel Peace Prize Committee would have the aura of the Nobel Peace Prize sprinkle on to a thousand ordinary women, but I have a simple, humble wish: that everyone and anyone could learn, with a different mind, to look at the people around us who resist violence and build peace, that they are not so superior that we cannot even look up to see them, but that they are so ordinary that they are just the people around us – our mothers, teachers, colleagues, neighbours, and, ourselves, that we all have the capacity to undertake to do something, to add some warmth and hope to the world, and, like the good wife of the doctor in *Blindness*, to nurture the heart of kindness, forgiving and giving.

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