

Women and peace work rooted in the ordinary

– The PeaceWomen Across the Globe project

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Threats to peace and security in the new millennium

That the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the IAEA and its director, El Baradei, at the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, reminds us that the serious threat of mass destruction confronting humanity is far from behind us; rather, it is right in front of us. That the IAEA had frustrated the urge of the USA to wage its war against Iraq before evidence of Iraq's possession of nuclear weapons was collected once again shows that the USA is itself a major threat to world peace, in possession of the most advanced weapons of science and technology, and ready to deploy them, with or without "legitimacy", to safeguard its economic and strategic interests. At the same time, it must be noted that the IAEA, despite its occasional discordance with the military timetable of the mighty powers, is fundamentally an instrument of the powers to contain expansion of late-comers, as its support for sanctions against Iran shows.

The new millennium does not seem to have promised alleviation of the turmoil, misery, violence and madness of the last millennium. On the one hand, the issue of war and open conflict is a major preoccupation for humanity, and on the other hand, the characteristic of today's capitalism is speculation and rule of finance capital; of the "transactions" of over USD 1.5 trillion everyday, over 95% has nothing to do with the substantial economy. However, this does not mean the end of the scramble over material resources. The USA, 4.5% of the world population, consumes 2,200 barrels of oil everyday, which is one quarter of the world consumption of oil. Such consumption necessitates the US state policy to assault and control oil-producing countries, despite all the excuses it presents to justify its military and economic hegemony.

The fear and sense of insecurity caused by the 9.11 incident has been manipulated by the USA; in the name of fighting terrorism, the defense budget has been boosted while social welfare has been drastically cut; the minorities and dissidents have been put to harassment or detention. The UN human rights report criticized US illegitimate detention and torture of prisoners in Guantanamo, and the UN Secretary-General stated

his support to the recommendations of the Report, that the US should put the prisoners on trial or release them, and close the Guantanamo camp. As usual, such recommendations were ignored by the USA.

Indeed, it is an obvious fact that the achievements the USA prides itself on are maintained by modern colonizing means of bloody violence. The pledge of the United Nations after World War II to achieve the progress of mankind through economic development, and the so-called radical elimination of violence and war, are but promotion of a linear development paradigm of westernization. The dictatorship of the “free market” turns people and things into resources open to exploitation or elimination. It seems that in every country on the planet, the path of modernization to follow the example of Europe and the USA is the only alternative. One either catches up in the scramble for oil, commodity market and finance speculation, which inevitably has to follow the logic of the US empire, or one lags behind and accepts the fate of abandonment and extinction. When social development and well being are primarily measured by per capita GNP, what such abstract indicators cannot cover – waste, destruction, injustice – becomes inevitable cost that everybody has to accept. Such indicators veil the injustices and harms in the everyday life lived by the majority of the population, and avoid the question: who have sacrificed their happiness and well being to pay for such development? How has this happened?

Faced with the increasing social differentiations, environmental degradation, exclusion of large numbers of people from livelihood safety nets, and the aggravation of conflicts, confrontations and wars, we need to probe into the question: what is the relationship between violence and “development”, and why is it that mainstream ideology still subscribes to confidence in “development”, and in the powers of “reason”? What are the alternatives in imagination and in practice that can help guide humanity out of its impasse and imminent annihilation?

1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005 Project

In 2005, a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize endeavoured to make visible to the world alternatives in imagination and practice. 1000 women from 150 countries, symbolic of the peace work of millions of women, were collectively nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. As a feminist endeavour, this nomination is collective and grassroots-oriented. It is a redefinition of peace by offering the multi-faceted dimensions of work for peace and security that the women are engaged in as interlinked and complementary, without which genuine peace is impossible. Their

work not only manifests the resourceful and effective strategies taken up by the women to counter the negative impacts of development and modernization, it also demonstrates a different mentality and attitude in the efforts for transformation: that we go beyond “reason” which can only keep us captive of the grand logic of the rampant abuse of power, and through our persistence in being with and relating to the people in suffering and pain, we nurture the courage for life, act against the impossible, and carve out new possibilities that transgress the logic of “reason”.

The 1000 Peacewomen project was not awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, yet it has received wide recognition for its contribution in orientating towards a major shift in approach and attitude in understanding the nature of violence and war, and towards concrete connections and linkages of efforts forging peace and security. In April 2006, it was awarded the Guernica Peace Award. The book documenting the 1000 stories, entitled *1000 PeaceWomen Across the Globe*, was awarded one of the most beautiful Swiss books of 2005 by the Ministry of Culture, Switzerland. Although it did not get the Nobel Peace Prize which it deserved, the project continues as “PeaceWomen Across the Globe”. Its future plans include the facilitation of interactions among the peacewomen for sharing experiences, thoughts, affections, and resources; promotion of the stories across language barriers by translating the book, the videos and the exhibits into over ten languages; staging of exhibitions of the peacewomen stories in all parts of the world; and research into the stories to highlight the ways the women negotiate with the circumstances of hardship and suffering. Among the many plans under discussion, one is to launch the project of providing a platform for many more stories of women making peace to be documented and circulated. The idea “from a thousand to a million” is to invite stories of women all over the world, which are already documented or are to be documented, to be put on the web by local groups or individuals, and the coordinating website will serve as a platform showing all the links to these stories which may be written in various languages. Another plan is to bring the peacewomen and the peacewomen project into the circuits of major regional and global interactions, and the World Social Forum being one key circuit. Besides participating in the various regional and global Social Forums, the project plans to call for the 2010 World Social Forum to be devoted to the overarching theme of celebrating the peace work of women in the first decade of the new millennium.

I will not go into the details of the Peacewomen Project, which may be viewed at www.1000peacewomen.org. I will highlight two underlying concepts of the Project. Firstly, its redefinition of the concept of peace, and secondly, its emphasis on the local and the grassroots.

As the Project initiators describe it: “We define peace as more than the absence of war. Our concept of peace is comprehensive and covers all aspects of life including politics, the economy, culture, social and natural environments, and social justice. We, therefore, are looking for women who have a holistic approach to peace. Our concept of peace is human security, which is endangered daily by conflict, poverty, inequality and disrespect for human rights.” The 1000 peacewomen from 150 countries who have been identified as exemplary in their peace work are engaged in diverse areas of work which are all seen as indispensable for genuine peace and security: the promotion and protection of human rights; the protection of children, women, people with disabilities, and other at-risk groups; the elimination of poverty in all its forms; the maintenance of a healthy, sustainable natural environment; the struggle against structural violence and discrimination (including patriarchal, caste, class, racial, and ethnic discriminations); the establishment of a just economic and social order; ensuring universal access to resources; promotion of peace negotiations and conflict mediation; health and education; analysis of mechanisms that endanger peace; documentation of war crimes and violations of human rights; action against all arms, especially the proliferation of small arms.

The second aspect that needs to be highlighted is the attention to the local. The experiences of the women allow us to see that the local is a site impacted by the complex effects of forces from the power centers, which include global forces such as the global market and global division of labour, nation-state’s priority policies, cosmopolitanism, and urban-centred development with wasteful consumption of energy, commodity goods and natural space. While the local is at the receiving end of various effects of forces which seem to be beyond its control or influence, it is the site where the effects are negotiated. The engagement at the local level is by no means insignificant. It is through such engagement that the most important battles are fought. One such battle is related to the shaping of subjectivity and mentality.

With today’s globalization being globalization of the American way of life, its effects are exerted on the most subjective level of desire. The body exists for consumption, and we are told this is the fruit of civilization, that advanced technology brings us comfort, health and innovative experiences. However, the peacewomen, through their efforts and practices, are saying NO to such globalization. They have used their bodies to forge a different relationship with the earth, the body of the planet, and nature. They have surfed one after another obstacle and barricade, forged a different globalization, nurtured mutual respect among people and respect for the earth, and

stirred the resonance of the heart that asks for no return but just gives, because one is affected. Such resonance of the heart brings new strengths and new inspirations, opening up possibilities that were not imaginable or dared not be imagined in the past. They allow the present strenuous circumstances and suffering experiences not to crystallize into historical burdens of grievances, but to transform into the soil of hope for a history yet to be made.

From the struggles in their lives, the joys and pains they go through, and their committed practices, from the histories of living persons and communities, from the uncertainties because there cannot be reasoned, premeditated, systematic plans for the future, from the complex, intertwined realities constituted by contingencies in daily life, precisely because they have the capacity for action, and the actions have the possibilities of drawing, impacting and inducing other actions, hence, they nurture the soil for hope to grow. Fragile sparks of fire apparently shimmer and shudder, and they are nowhere to be found when the prairie fires roar; yet, the sparks of fire insist on their being, to give themselves and their communities some light and heat. These small sparks of light and heat illuminate hope.

Search for alternatives

The Bamako Appeal is an attempt to crystallize the thoughts and experiences generated by five years of the World Social Forum processes. It highlights ten areas of endeavours to be taken up by civil society. As I have been involved in the People's Plan for the 21st Century (PP21) processes in Asia, I see much resemblance in the two endeavours in terms of search and articulation of alternatives for the people's movements to chart out a different trajectory.

The PP21 was initiated in 1989 in Japan as a people's movement to respond to the hazards of modernization, and it has involved large numbers of people in a process of convergence. The three statements, namely the Minamata Declaration of 1989, the Rajchadamnoen Pledge of 1992 and the Sagarmatha Declaration of 1996, articulate the aspirations and analyses accumulated in the processes. In 1996, it was resolved that the participants, mostly NGOs, should put their effort to promoting a People's Charter which, going beyond resolutions and statements by NGOs and intellectuals, will involve people's initiatives and people's movements through the articulation, documentation and reflection of stories of people's struggles, and this collective reflection, itself a process of self learning and mutual support, will strive to generate alternative theories and concepts derived from people's actual practices, forming a

force for transformation.

There were many difficulties in promoting the People's Charter process with a mode of operation different from conventional NGO practices. Coupled with administrative problems, it was decided in 2002 in a gathering in Bangkok to formally close the first chapter of the PP21 processes. However, various interactions and initiatives have taken off from the formal PP21 processes, and the second chapter is envisaged to continue as a pedagogical movement.

One of the insights I have gained from my involvement in the PP21 processes is how movements tackle the representation of problems and resolutions. It seems that in the current conjuncture, there is a lack of a macro understanding of problems or a proposition of radical alternatives. For example, workers' demands are often restricted to the fight for rights, such as minimum wages or working hours, and along this line of practice, the identity of the workers is presented as that of a victim, fighting against injustices. However, the opposition to injustices on the level of political representation and legal struggle without engaging the everyday life as a site for radical transformation falls short of challenging the logic and mechanisms upholding and naturalizing such injustices. The logic operates by ever extending its grips on more and more aspects of life, producing deeper and deeper relations of dependency, whether as a consumer whose daily survival depends on the market that decides how one should live one's life, as a student dependent on an education system holding sway over him/her through the monopoly of accreditation, as a body subject to standards of well being and beauty defined by influential organizations, be it business enterprises or medical institutions.

Negative critiques or defensive strategies can at best disrupt a prevailing order but not by itself guide us out of it. For example, how can the workers' battles for higher wages, union right, collective bargaining, or some degree of control over factory management be constituents of a war for the transformation of labour-capital relations, with an imagination for the exploitative relations to be transformed? How can we, here and now, in daily life, nurture different capacities for reconnecting with others, for shaping a different world? What sort of communities, attitudes and orientations can allow for something different to come up? How can mobilizations and solidarities be fostered without appealing to a victim identity, but instead, open up alternative spaces of self management and local governance, remake social and community relations, as well as attend to the endangered relations between humans and nature?

The quest for alternatives requires that we adopt a different way of seeing things, that we are able to recognize different forms of mobilization and of people's initiatives, which will counter the pessimism and passivity of the grand narrative of TINA – “there is no alternative”. In this, we nurture the capacity for activism that is not confined to reactive responses to imposing forces that seem to be dictating our destinies, but rather, the innovative spirit is committed to the rebuilding of cooperative social relations within and among groups, and the rebuilding of mutually nurturing relations with the earth, so as to break the curse of dependency precipitated by the ever expanding capitalist processes.