Women and Peace Economics

Lau Kin Chi

We are now 13 years into the new millennium. 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 5 trillion everyday, over 95% has nothing to do with substantial economy. However, this does not mean the end of the scramble over resources. The USA, 4.5% of the world population, consumes 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.

Despite the setting of the millennium goals to reduce poverty by 2015, the goals have failed dismally in most countries. Global figures on poverty are shocking and show little sign of declining. The deaths of 30,000 children every day from starvation or preventable disease no longer make news. There seems to be a widespread acceptance of this crude reality as if this were the fitting fate of the poor in developing countries that have uncontrolled population growth. If this seemingly innocent 'common sense' has for so long made things tolerable, it is high time we questioned such a position, for even as the world is becoming more developed, it is also becoming increasingly polarized, with growing numbers of people being subjected to worsening poverty and ecological devastation. Consequently, as the conditions of life become much harsher, and this harshness finds its way into the interstices of daily life, so does insecurity. Even the rich are not immune to this, despite the fact that they have the means to screen themselves off from the violence that haunts the daily lives of those who lack practically any means of social mobility.

It is necessary for us to go beyond the public face of poverty to trace the processes by which hundreds of millions of people have been thrust into conditions that deprive them of a decent, sustainable livelihood – displacement, loss of land, contamination of water resources, degeneration of artisan skills, an abysmal, exploitative labor market, the swelling of the ranks of the unemployed, the destruction of kinship or community support networks. This may allow us to better understand that 'modernization' and 'development' are not all they are trumped up to be. Not only have they not delivered

on their many promises, they are also often the very forces that destroy the conditions of subsistence for large sectors of people. Mega projects like dams or nuclear plants, battles over energy and resources that often form the roots of larger wars and conflicts, the modern projects of nation-building which privilege majoritarian identities and deny cultural and ethnic diversities, the growing emphasis on commodification and capitalization at the cost of human relationships and communities, the replacement of decency and reciprocity by greed and indifference as the prevailing values… these are problems that now seem so serious that many see them as signaling the loss of hope, sometimes even presaging the apocalyptic downfall of humanity.

Yet, despite this often very real doomsday scenario, there is hope. It bears remembering that the world today is not ruled only by capital, greed, or egoism. Many of the dispossessed, the disenfranchised have refused to be victims waiting for meager humanitarian aid parcels to drop from the air. Silent, determined, persevering, invisible, their chosen path is arduous as they endeavor to rebuild from the fragments, to restore conditions for self reliance, to delink from globalizing forces, to persist in their peripheral efforts, in the twilight, in the oblivion of 'progress'. They are convinced that indigenous wisdoms, values and lifestyles cannot be wiped out just because they are seen as 'primitive', that the world can be other than the dismal one of corruption and crime. Their message to the world of neon lights and casino economies is unambiguous: that unless there is a major change in the current path of so-called 'development' and 'modernization', it is not only the poor who will suffer, but also the rich and powerful who will go down as the economic bubble bursts.

Alternative ways of livelihood, in which human beings live with restraint and humility with other human beings, with other living species, with nature, can be found among indigenous, rural and marginal communities. For such communities, livelihood is not merely a matter of earning money, accumulating capital, or consuming commodities; the human being is not only an economic being, but is instead a cultural and social being.

In 2005, there was a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize that 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-based. 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 PeaceWomen project documents and connects women who work in the interlinking of livelihood, environment and peace politics. Their work contradicts the usual assumption that environmental concerns are the prerogatives of the middle class, or can be attended to only after a certain economic level is achieved. The assumptions of such a discourse is predominant in developing countries where the impatience to "modernize" at the fastest pace and at any cost has resulted in not only environmental disasters but also hardship for a large section of the population who find themselves relegated to the margin in the process.

The experiences of many of the women and their communities 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, no matter whether it is indigenous identity, dignity of life, or agent of change.

The 1000 Peacewomen Project has placed its emphasis on making visible and celebrating the work of the women in their practical, daily life engagements. They offer examples of negotiation with and challenge of the forces at work that shape not only their environment but also their subjectivity. By highlighting how they deal with the tensions, contradictions and differences, the Project also goes beyond mere documentation, but is itself a catalyst for change, involved in the process of making sense of the problems, facilitating connections, forging solidarities, opening up spaces of activism, and creating new possibilities. Thus, engaged in a process for change, the Project goes beyond structural or policy changes, and touches important aspects of cultural and gender politics. In short, the Project itself is engaged in a politics and alliance of hope.

This Project was initiated and now coordinated at the global level, disseminated by different coordinators working at the national level, and actualized by them with the help of many other women activists involved at the local level. Women nominated in the name of "peace" come from very different political, social and cultural backgrounds, many different or even antagonistic kinds of "hope" for peace may be projected on this Project.

No matter whether it is at the local, national or global level, peace politics that draw on women's everyday life struggles and connectedness goes beyond policy or

structural change, although fighting for policy change is one of the strategies that peace politics has to be involved in. Practices at micro level such as telling a different story about the rights to the indigenous people, supporting rural girls to go to school by offering accommodation and food to them, changing the life style of people from wastefulness to cherishing mutual support by running a second hand shop, having the courage to be ready to submerge with the land to show their dignity of living, and so on, are significant to demonstrate the subjectivity of women and as agent of change.

Besides negotiating borders that are constructed by national and international politics, the work of peace women also negotiate cultural borders of segregation, discipline, limited vision and experiences, and prejudices that divide people and the movement at the local level. This kind of negotiation requires more courage, patience, perseverance, creativity and wisdom.

The moving and inspirational stories of the women show the many such alternatives being lived out every day, in different contexts and under different constraints. They show how thousands of peacewomen are working for sustained peace. They remind us of alternative practices and ways of thinking, seeing, relating to one another, and relating to nature. The appropriation of science and technology in modern development is made possible by the language of progress, efficiency and calculated rationality. Such language, and indeed the many cultural processes that are harnessed to this project, work towards liberating greed by equipping it with powerful means of control and destruction for the appropriation of resources and energies from nature and from human beings. The stories from the women show us the importance of different cultural processes for the cultivation of different mentalities other than those of arrogance and greed. They show us that, without mental transformation, without paying attention to an ‘ecology of mind’, no political processes can resolve the question of violence and attain the balance necessary for human beings to exist in peace and harmony. It is in this spirit that we honor, with these stories, the minimal demand of economic rights for sustainable livelihoods.