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**Peace Activist Women During
the 1980s in the U.S.:
*Motherhood,
Motivation and Movement***

Women are highly visible and articulate in the peace movements of this country, active to an extent that exceeds their general level of participation in the public arena. Further, women have asserted repeatedly that they participate in the dialog on war and peace as women, claiming gender-specific rights and responsibilities for the tasks of critiquing the social ethos and generating a transformative paradigm for human community. Frequently, the claim is based on a connection between their life-tasks as creators and nurturers.

This article presents the link frequently made by these activists between mothering and concern with peace issues. It also examines their analysis of the current model for national defense and security in light of their nurturing commitments. It focuses on the way in which their lives as “mothers” motivated them to become activists and afforded them a basis from which to analyze and critique the current national defense paradigm. It then reviews the practical outcomes of women’s peace activism.

Women’s peace activism in the 1980s

During the 1980s, peace activist women in the United States created a public dialog concerning the social and ethical implications of the national defense policy and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Although most women were recruited into the conversation through preexisting social connections, the exchange created through these associations was political and social rather than personal and private.

While feminist activists within the peace movement were growing increasingly vocal, visible and militant, their efforts were augmented dramatically by a passionate and unexpected source: “mothers.” As the result of raised consciousness around the significance of nuclear issues, thousands of previously

uninvolved women joined the peace movement. In addition to joining established peace groups, “mothers” created new organizations and actions designed to mobilize women. Peace organizations activated women’s networks by constructing links between key gender identity components, experiences and loyalties. A host of new groups acknowledged themselves as “women’s spaces,” by including the designations “Women’s,” “Mothers” or “Grandmothers,” in their name, i.e., Mothers Embracing Nuclear Disarmament, Grandmothers for Peace. The literature, meetings, conferences and other public presentations explored the link between women’s traditional roles as nurturer and protector of the weak, young or vulnerable, and the current threat war and militarism poses to health and life. The discussion of peace, peacemaking and desired outcomes evolved as the diverse groups were drawn together in a loose coalition with other, older, more established and more diverse peace and justice groups in attempts to maximize their effectiveness. Social critique became increasingly sophisticated as groups of women usually separated by race, class, religion and geography met face to face to hear what peace (and the war system) looked like from various social or economic locations. The dialogue that ensued created a growing awareness of the nature of the threat faced by humanity and the multi-dimensional nature of peacemaking.

The study

In the late 1980s, 100 women from a broad spectrum of peace groups were interviewed and asked about their motivation for activism. The study was conducted to elicit activists’ statements concerning motivation for involvement in the peace movement. Of these 100 women, 25 were from groups with gender-specific names i.e., Mothers for Nuclear Disarmament or Women Against Nuclear Disarmament. Another 25 were active in radical groups with strong feminist identification: Movement for a New Society, Pugent Sound Women’s Peace Camp, Seneca Women’s Encampment for A Future of Peace and Justice. Twenty-five women interviewed belonged to general peace organizations such as Freeze, while the final group was drawn from those whose primary connection to the peace movement was through faith-based organizations.

In addition to the individual interviews conducted, 15 peace conferences and gatherings were attended. These included large, public gatherings such as The Ribbon, Justine Merritt’s project to ring the capital with a ribbon of panels from all over the world visualizing “what we could not bear to see lost in a nuclear holocaust”; the World Congress on International Peace; Colorado Women’s Agenda; A New Concept of National Security: Meeting People’s Needs; Women and Global Security: Forum 86; and Feminism and Non-Violence Gathering held in Tucson, Arizona in 1986. The variety of gatherings ranged from conferences designed by Washington, D.C. professional activists who arranged the presence of important political figures and movie stars to contribute to the status of the meeting, to an invitation-only gathering focused

on studying the goals of feminism and nonviolence. These conferences provided an opportunity to hear women conversing on these topics informally as well as observe the responses they gave to speakers and the topics addressed.

Study Results: Mothers' arms are not nuclear arms

Mother-love and political activism

When asked, "What would you give as your prime motivation for peace work?" many women responded emphatically that they were moved to action by a sense of responsibility towards children. Concern for the wellbeing of children appeared as a motivational theme in 67 percent of the interviews, and was identified as the prime reason for activism in 36 of the 100 interviews. While children appeared as a theme more frequently among women located in religious and women-specific groups, they were strongly represented throughout the interviews. Of the 33 women who did not articulate concern for children as a motivator in the course of the interview, 24 did not have children. In a response typical of the one-third of the sample who listed children as their prime motivation for activism, one activist answered, "My motivation would be children, all the children, my children and all children" (#45). One first-time activist explained her commitment to peace work saying that she would simply play racquetball every afternoon and go to lunch with friends and shop if she did not have her children to consider. Instead, she donated time at a peace office because, "I feel like I owe it to my kids to give them a chance at an excellent life. They may blow it," she admitted, "but I don't want anyone else to blow it for them.... And I think for anyone you talk to in Beyond War, I bet 99 per cent will say 'for my children'" (#9).

Mother-power and the creation of peace organizations

The persistent concern for the wellbeing of children as a motivating factor in the interviews is consistent with successful movement recruitment efforts targeted towards women as mothers and nurturers. The link between peace activism and responsible parenthood in the nuclear age was also present in the stories related by several women who started national peace organizations. Betty Bumpers, founder of Peace Links, often recites the story of how she was forced to deal with the possibility of nuclear war, the affects that it would have on her own family, and how that moved her to engage politically. Edith Villastrago, co-founder of Women Strike for Peace, provided another example as she reflected on the centrality of motherhood in that movement's genesis. She said, "It started when my children were small and I was very concerned about the radioactive poison which was raining down on the milk and food of our children, and so a number of us got together and started Women's Strike for Peace." Thinking back on the situation she reminisced, "It just happened to be the kind of issue that concerns so many more mothers and women around the country that it just developed like wildfire" (#57).

Justine Merritt, the creative spark behind The Ribbon Peace Project, recorded the surfacing of her concern for children in the poem “The Gift”:

For months—
or is it years?
I have carefully,
I have silently prayed to the Father to spare the ocean’s shells;
For the sake of one lovely shell, I’ve prayed,
do not let the world be destroyed. . . .
And for all those months of all those years,
since an August day in faraway Japan,
I’ve prayed for shells and roses and birds’ song
and hid,
because I could not bear to see such a secret sorrow,
hid the image of a baby’s ear,
curved, soft;
not as hard as an ocean’s shell -a baby’s ear-
no protection at all -a baby’s ear-
against the wind of a nuclear holocaust . . .
The shell, the rose, the bird’s song
deliberate disguises to hide the babies, the toddlers,
the children from the unspeakable (#40).

These lines, taken from the middle of “The Gift,” reflect the prominent role of the growing awareness of the vulnerability of her grandchildren, and all children, in her motivation to move into peace activism. This concern generated a project that involved tens of thousands of people before it climaxed in the wrapping of the “ribbon” around the Pentagon on August 4, 1985. Justine Merritt’s poem reflects many women’s angst over the threat of nuclear armaments to the wellbeing of children.

Motherhood as a secondary and sustaining motivator in activism

Concern for children emerged as a prominent and critical factor in the motivation for sustained activism in cases where another concern was designated as the prime reason for participation. Women with long-established commitments to peace that antedated their maternity reflected the importance of their concern for children in their present labours for peace. The impact of maternity on active peace women is exemplified in the observations made by an activist attached to the staff of a national politician. “Since my son has been born, it’s just so phenomenal the effect it has had. It has been sort of a recommitment for me. Peace is even more important and,” she disclosed, “more urgent and makes more sense.... That has really been a strong motivation for me” (#7). Another activist who participated in several peace organizations on

a national level and whose commitments to peacemaking also antedated her maternity, revealed a similar sharpening of interest in peacemaking by virtue of the presence of children in her life. "It behooves us," she observed, "to give an all-out effort to make the quality of life better, not only for ourselves and our children, but for their children.... I am looking at grandmotherhood in a few years and how do I want society to be for my grandchildren to live in?" (#71).

"Maternal" identity and activism

The interviews and conferences revealed a "maternal" consciousness among the majority of activists: women reflected an awareness of the significance of their roles as mothers and nurturers. One activist succinctly captured the link between activism and women's gender-identity as she explained: "We are the nurturers. We make the babies and we care for them, and that makes it easier to care for other people's babies" (#63). The tasks which follow birthing, the routine care-giving, was seen as formative in the way women develop and act on their values. "A mother has to be patient and compassionate and more mellow, not as hot-headed, because she is dealing with new life." This role, which extends beyond their responsibilities to particular individuals, and which may be anticipated by those who have not yet had children, is frequently generalized to care for life and the vulnerable in general. For many women, personal identity is inextricably linked with nurturing tasks.

Further, activist women argued that culture had encouraged them, as women and mothers, to develop and display many values and attributes, including reverence for life, sensitivity, flexibility, cooperativeness and nurture. While they did not believe that these were exclusively women's traits, they maintained that women were "allowed" to deepen these traits in ways men were not. In the words of an activist at a national conference, "We've been acculturated to be nurturers, to respect life, and I think if all humanity had that kind of nurturing spirit and love for life that I believe is inherent in women, we'd have less wars."

The possibility of a nuclear conflagration threatens the life work of the millions of women who have committed their lives to the protection of the vulnerable and the promotion of communal well-being through careful nurturing. Any plan that threatens human existence does not reflect the values and lives of the care-givers. The nuclear defense model provided by world leaders particularly lack credibility, as it destroys the very qualities that it pretends to protect. Throughout the interviews, activists remarked that mothering in the nuclear age includes protecting the children from the threat posed by those who devised plans to defend them with nuclear weapons. As Dorothee Soelle has noted: "More and more women understand that the world we want to build, the new sharing of life together we seek, is threatened by nothing as much as the militarism of the men who rule. Once you have understood what it means to be a woman, you belong on the side of peace and not among those who want to secure it unto death" (1973: 67).

Motherhood and the threat posed by military machismo

For women whose identity is centered upon the care of children, the casual attitude towards the lives expended to achieve military goals threatens the work of a lifetime. During the interviews, several women commented directly and, sometimes angrily, at the control over life that men with military mindsets possessed. It seemed crucial to them that national military conduct be made to conform to policies that promoted and ensured life rather than threatened it. “We are the creators, really, the caretakers of the creation of life. And it’s stupid to pour all this energy into giving birth and rearing healthy children and then to stand around and let some fool maniac, because he is hungry for power, destroy them” (#49). In a similar vein, another activist queried, “Why should they [women] bring up these children to be killed in the war? Why should they use their whole lives nurturing and caring for these children and let them get killed because some Henry Kissinger thinks it’s a wonderful idea to kill Asians? It’s infuriating” (#52). For women who invest their lives in the creation and nurture of human life, the cost of nuclear weapons is too dear. For those who made the connection between nuclear armaments and the fate of their children, the mandate seemed clear.

“Our Stunning Harvest,” a poem by Ellen Bass, captured this view as emphatically as any other statement:

I want to talk to the president.
I want to go with other mothers
and meet with the president.
And I want mothers from Russia there.
And Chinese mothers
And the head of China
and mothers from Saudi Arabia and Japan and South Africa
and all the heads of state and the families of the heads of state
and the children, all the children of the mothers.
I want a meeting.
I want to ask the president, is there nothing precious to you?

And when the president explains how it’s the Russians,
I want the Russian women to say,
We don’t want war.
I want all the women to scream
We don’t want war, we, the people do not want war....
I want the mothers of the children of the heads of state screaming.
I want them to scream until their voices are hoarse whispers
raw as the bloody rising of the sun,
I want them to hiss
How dare you?
How dare you? (cited in McAllister, 1982: 67-69).

The women interviewed insisted that mothers' voices needed to be heard by those who made the decisions. A paradigm of defense that is divorced from a sense of custodial care for life produces community destruction. With the lives of those for whom they have cared and the future of the children is at stake, Mothers need to participate in the decision-making.

Mother wisdom: The nurturer's analysis of the current defense paradigm

As noted above, organizations were started and "mothers" were recruited into the movement by the threat nuclear weapons posed to life, that children would not have a future if the nuclear threat were not abated. "My prime reason for being involved in peacework is the survival of the species. I am very concerned about peace," explained one activist, "because ... if you do not have children because of a nuclear holocaust, you don't have anything" (#9). Thus, the foundation of the mothers, repudiation of the defense model was its threat to children's survival. Once within the peace community, however, they participated in an in-depth analysis of the current defense model. In small groups and large gatherings, women gathered information and examined its affects on various aspects of child development and welfare. After evaluating the evidence, they concluded that the war system impeded children's growth in several tangible ways.

Adverse affects on children's emotional, educational and moral development

Women interviewed were concerned with the negative affects of nuclear armaments on the emotional wellbeing of children. From their investigations and experiences, they concluded that children growing up in the shadow of the nuclear bomb lost the freedom of youth and were distracted from their appropriate developmental tasks under the weight of fear and anxiety they carried. In an interview for this study, Vivian Verdun-Roe, film-maker and recipient of an academy award for her film, *In The Nuclear Shadow: What Can the Children Tell Us*, talked about the ways in which teaching raised her consciousness and made her aware of children's fear that they would not have a chance to live out their lives. The film she produced presented children's perceptions that nuclear weapons threatened their existence and instilled within them feelings of insecurity and apprehension. "I really wanted the world to know what the kids were feeling," Ms. Verdun-Roe related, "and I wanted the world to take their concerns seriously and act in a responsible way in dealing with these children's concerns" (#70).

Women also identified the economic effect of military spending on resources for schools and the other domestic programs directly touching the daily lives of children. Analyzing national expenditures on education, social programs and military preparedness, they concluded that if national security in a democracy is ultimately dependent upon an informed and educated popula-

tion ready to defend its freedom, current allocations undermined rather than strengthened the nation. A popular peace poster remarks of a coveted future where “Schools will have all the money they need and the military will have to hold bake sales for missiles.”

Activist women also evaluated the moral costs of living in a militarized state. Assessing military ethics in light of their own ideals, morals and standards for conduct, they determined that they wanted a world characterized by different values as the milieu for their children. Perceiving the militarization of the culture as diminishing the moral quality of life, activist women demanded that the size and expenditures of the military be reduced to a level where it does not threaten to become the controlling and defining institution of the culture. “I would say that the most important reason that I do peace work, outside of my clarity that it is what is necessary in order to be faithful to the religious call,” reflected one minister in a peace church, “is my children and the wish that ... the world my children will have be different than what it is now” (#26). The different future for which she works is one in which masculinity is not measured in terms of machismo and conflicts are not resolved through violence.

“It takes a village”

The conversation within the peace movement also explored the link between the healthy growth of children and the health of the community in which they live. The discussions located children and families in the real communities in which they live and identified the ways in which mothers’ work was facilitated or impeded by unhealthy communities. Activists examined the meaning of the nuclear culture for the communities that women have loved, fostered and cultivated as places where children grow and human beings experience their relatedness to others. Concerned with community on the local, national and global levels, activists identified the relationship between military spending and inadequate funding for community priorities and projects.

Review of information provided from a variety of sources revealed the inverse correlation between nuclear weapons and social justice. The peace and security women needed for their life projects was jeopardized by the build-up of weapons systems. National security paid for by depriving communities of basic necessities for the neediest of its members resulted in social alienation, deterioration and unrest. Peace secured by funds appropriated from community development projects undermined lasting peace because, “If in fact you’re seeking peace on a national and global level, you have to also seek peace at home on a domestic level, and vice versa” (#71).

Activists’ analysis of the economic impact of militarism on minority elements of the culture, especially women and the poor, reported an overwhelmingly negative affect. As one Denver activist explained, “There is a whole way in which poverty, peace, and women are all very interrelated, that most of the poor are women and children. I see a relationship between poverty and growing militarism” (#30). In short, assessment of the affects on militarism on

children must include the affects that it has upon the larger “village” in which children grow and develop.

Voices from the margins

Women from oppressed communities provided a particularly scathing analysis of the nuclear policy and its effects on the lives of the members of their communities. In many ways, the consequences of producing nuclear weapons are experienced daily in the neighborhoods, the circumstances and conditions under which large numbers of “their people” work and live. Their communities resemble war zones, as lack of decent housing, employment, medical care, and basic human services conspire to promote criminality, mental illness, and despair. They trace the effects of national nuclear priorities to the poverty of the women and children. One activist emphasized this noting:

My need is to see justice done. My need is to see children fed. My need is to find community jobs, jobs with dignity because they can't find work. So my need is to do justice. ...I realize that justice will never be done as long as governments continue to steal our resources, our finances and put them into militarism. So I don't come into this looking for a peaceful world and living happy ever after. I want some real things. I want clinics. I want daycare centres. I want real things that make a difference to the people I love. (#47)

While the relationship between social justice and enduring peace is widely recognized and prevalent throughout the peace culture, oppressed communities continually contribute to the process of developing a more radical and comprehensive critique of the present system by championing a penetrating analysis of the current paradigm. They asserted that the current model robs their communities of necessary human and economic resources while perpetuating racism and classism. It increases the economic, emotional and social burdens of those least able to support them. It undermines the labor of women's bodies and lives and distorts the shape of both the present and the future. From the perspectives garnered as nurturers and caregivers, these women reject the present defense paradigm and indict it as destructive of community.

Outcomes of mother-wisdom and political reflections

Through revealing the significant threat that nuclear weapons pose to the fabric and meaning of women's lives (and that which they hold as most precious), activist women united women with diverse ideological affinities and concerns into a political force. Their repudiation of national defense policy through mass political action and civil disobedience expressed their resolution not to be deflected until national defense and security systems preserve and protect that which they held sacred. From collective reflection came both clarity and empowerment to speak in the political arena.

While various groups within the women's peace movement of the 1980s

utilized different strategies and methods of engagement, the overall effect was that of calling a national referendum on the “defense” policy of the United States. They made manifest the ways in which the current definitions of security, defense, public interest and peace are derivative of a worldview where individual and national supremacy and domination are the unspoken goals, the motivating reasons behind the investment in the nuclear arsenal. The various groups and actions participated in naming the ways in which the fundamental assumptions of national policy derive from a dangerous and distorted model of reality, a mode that cannot stand when confronted with the realities of women’s lives.

Recognizing the vulnerability of the planet and its inhabitants, women who viewed themselves as nurturers and custodians of life demanded that national leaders take initiative in creating and establishing an inclusive and enduring peace. Anything less, they maintained, is tantamount to global suicide and will face the continued resistance of women. Not content with cosmetic changes, caregivers sought fundamental re-visioning and restructuring of national priorities and policies. National Senators and other political leaders attended the women’s conferences and pledged reduction of the nuclear arsenal.

They demonstrated the inadequacy of a partial and flawed worldview that only addressed certain elements of the issues of peace and national security while ignoring other key aspects. They challenged the choice to utilize public funds to invest in nuclear weapons. They demanded public recognition of the on-going social cost of militarism.

Further, activists demythologized the authoritative stance assumed by national leaders when describing military plans and policies. They identified the imperious voice of the defense experts as attempts to intimidate individuals and stop public dialog on critical issues. They uncovered in nuclear justifications the presence of the calculating, pseudo-objective warrior who separates and disguises the human meaning of his intent by use of disassociated euphemisms (Elstain, 1987). Significantly, they recognized within the arguments defending the nuclear proliferation a distinct worldview and value system with no more objective claim to reflect reality accurately than other, less lethal, visions.

Activist women in the ’80s undermined the “taken for granted” quality of the military worldview embraced by national leaders by naming it as one possible paradigm among many. They exposed it as a humanly constructed view of the world, with traceable origins and assessable results. They showed how careful analysis discloses its construction and perpetuation, its beneficiaries and its current and proposed victims. In demystifying the status quo and revealing it as a human construct, activists made the system more transparent and resistible and introduced the real possibility of its appraisal and rejection. They made it clear to elected officials that nuclear armament was not justifiable as a defense of American women and children.

From where we are into a secure future for our children

From the perspective of activist women who have taken a custodial stance toward children, their communities or the planet, the present model of defense is dangerous and unacceptable. The plans made and pursued by those in positions of national authority lead neither to corporate nor individual security, but to incalculable poverty, suffering and death. The present model denies the reality of global interconnectedness, finite resources, the fragility of the planet, the relationship between peace and social justice, and the inestimable value of life. The “peace” produced through the taking of the world as a hostage is not lasting, just or inclusive. Such a peace does not reflect the lives and values of the women who have determined that this model shall no longer be promulgated in their names, as if it promoted their best interests.

According to the activists interviewed, it is necessary to clarify what we want for our families and communities and define peace in concrete ways before we can create it. Actions must be directed toward specific goals, specific visions of a just and peaceful society. We cannot hope our accomplishments will go past the clarity of our dreams. We begin with the dreams and work backward, asking what it will take to realize them. While imagination is the first step towards peace, in dreams begin responsibilities. There is a relationship between the desired future and the work we must do. The peace imagined by the 1980s activists is the product of careful listening, analysis, revision and courage.

Motherhood may not prove to be an adequate base for social transformation. It has not consistently withstood pressures of class, race and nationalism in past confrontations. It is, however, a fruitful place to begin the dialog. The work accomplished in circles of activated mothers demonstrates that motherhood can create a common ground for conversation, which is the starting place for all negotiation.

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