

Why We Need Women's Actions and Feminist Voices for Peace

by Starhawk

Among the hundreds of groups and actions being mounted against the war on Iraq are a significant number called and organized by women. Code Pink: Unreasonable Women for Peace has disrupted Congressional hearings and mounted an ongoing women's peace vigil at the White House since November 17. Women in Black hold vigils in hundreds of communities around the world on a regular basis. Women Rising for Peace and Justice, the women's caucus of United for Peace, has issued a call for January 17 to be a day of women's actions against the war.

Women are deeply impacted by war, racism and poverty—the three evils named by Martin Luther King. But when we stand for peace as women, it is not to make a case for our special victimhood, but to represent a different vision of strength. Women-initiated and women-led actions have a special energy and power. That power comes not from excluding men—most of these actions welcome men as participants—but because of the joy and visionary potential that arise when we come together as women to defend the values of life and caring that we hold dear.

To defend those values, we need not just women's voices against the war, but specifically feminist voices. For feminism allows us to analyze patriarchy, the constellation of values, ideas and beliefs that reinforces male control over women.

No set of qualities is innately or exclusively 'female' or 'male'. Men can be compassionate, loving and kind, as women can be tough, brave, or callous. But patriarchy assigns the qualities associated with aggression and competition to men, and relegates to women the devalued roles of nurturing and service. Patriarchy values the hard over the soft, the tough over the tender; punishment, vengeance and vindictiveness over compassion, negotiation, and reconciliation. The 'hard' qualities are identified with power, success and masculinity, and exalted. The 'soft' qualities are identified with weakness, powerlessness, and femininity, and denigrated.

Under patriarchy, men are shamed and considered weak if they exhibit qualities associated with women. Politicians win elections by being tough—tough on terror, tough on crime, tough on drugs, tough on welfare mothers. Calls for cooperation, negotiation, compassion or recognition of our mutual interdependence are equated with womanly weakness. In the name of 'toughness', the power holders deprive the poor of the means of life, the troubled and the ill of treatment and care, the ordinary citizen of our privacy and civil rights. Force, punishment, and violence are patriarchy's answer to conflicts and social problems.

Patriarchy finds its ultimate expression in war. War is the field in which the tough can prove their toughness and the winners triumph over the losers. Soldiers can be

coerced into dying or killing when their fear of being called womanlike or cowardly overrides their reluctance to face or deal death. War removes every argument for tenderness and dissolves all strictures on violence. War is the justification for the clampdown that lets the rulers impose control on every aspect of life.

Wise feminists do not claim that women are innately kinder, gentler, more compassionate than men per se. If we did, the Margaret Thatchers and Condoleeza Rice's of the world would soon prove us wrong. We do claim that patriarchy encourages and rewards behavior that is brutal and stupid. We need raucous, incautious feminist voices to puncture the pomposity, the arrogance, the hypocrisy of the war mongers, to point out that gorilla chest-beating does not constitute diplomacy, that having the world's largest collection of phallic projectile weapons does not constitute moral authority, that invasion and penetration are not acts of liberation.

And we need to remind the world that modern warfare never spares the civilian population. Rape is always a weapon of war, and women's bodies are used as prizes for the conquerors. Women and children and men, too, who have no say in the policies of their rulers face death, maiming, wounding, and the loss of their homes, livelihoods, and loved ones in a war.

Patriarchy is the brother of racism, which sets one group of people above another, dehumanizing and devaluing the 'other', who is seen as deserving of punishment, fair game for violence and annihilation.

We need feminist voices for peace because the issues of women's freedom and autonomy are being used cynically to justify anti-Arab racism and military takeovers of Arab countries.

The U.S. and its allies, who now pose as the liberators of women in the Muslim world, are the same powers which gave the Taliban, Saddam Hussein, and Al Qaeda their start-up funds, supported them and put them in power, with no consideration for their impact on women. The 'liberators' of Afghan women ignored the grassroots women's organizations such as RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, installed a new government almost equally as oppressive as the Taliban., and excluded the heroic women who have risked their lives to educate their daughters and maintain some sense of freedom under oppressive rule.

We protest the hypocrisy which trumpets the oppression of women in Arab societies while the oppression of women in the West is never raised as an issue. Nor is the racism, economic oppression and endemic violence of Western culture acknowledged when the West is hailed as the flag bearer of freedom. Women cannot walk safely through the streets of the West, nor can we be assured of the means of life for our children, of health care in our illnesses, of care and support in our old age. The ongoing daily violence against women and children worldwide, the violence of battering, sexual assault, poverty, and lack of opportunity, the global traffic in women's bodies, is ignored. And the vast global inequalities which benefit the West are also not acknowledged. Nor is the history, that Western exploitation of the East and South generated the wealth that allowed our greater 'development' and 'enlightenment'.

Oppression of women is real, in Muslim societies and non-Muslim societies, around the globe. But women cannot be liberated by the tanks and bombs of those who are continuing centuries-old policies of exploitation, commandeering resources for themselves, and fomenting prejudice against the culture and heritage which is also a deep part of a woman's being.

We need a feminist voice for peace to say that those who truly care about life and freedom will work to support, not conquer, those women in every culture who are struggling for liberation and social justice.

The war against Iraq is not about safety, security, or liberation. The war's real aims include gaining control of Iraq's rich oil reserves and establishing U.S. hegemony over the Middle East. Racism is the ideology of empire, the set of beliefs that tell us we deserve to rule because we are superior to some other group.

Racism and patriarchy are the recruitment tools for the legions of enforcers: the soldiers, police, judges, bureaucrats and officials who protect institutions of power. Patriarchy, racism, homophobia, discrimination against Arabs and Muslims, anti-Semitism, ageism and all forms of prejudice keep our eyes trained downward, looking at those we see as beneath us, instead of looking upward and seeing clearly how we are being manipulated.

We need strong feminist voices to cry out that there is no hierarchy of human value, that every child must be cherished, that we claim common ground with women, children, and men around the world.

Oil is the lifeblood, and the military is the ultimate enforcer of economic policies which disenfranchise the poor and undercut the livelihoods of working people around the globe, consolidating wealth and power in fewer and fewer hands, devouring the family farm, the vibrant neighborhood, the old growth forest and the last remaining wilderness, eroding the soil, poisoning the atmosphere, disrupting the earth's climate and threatening every life support system of the planet. The global corporate capitalist system also exalts toughness and ruthless competition, and exhibits utter disdain for caring, compassion, and nurturing values. Women staff the maquiladoras and the sweatshops that produce the cheap goods of the global economy. The vast majority of the world's poor are women and children. A feminist voice for peace must identify and address the root causes of war. "Peace" cannot be separated from justice, including economic justice. And real security can only come when we weave a new global web of mutual aid and support.

We need women's actions, to make these larger connections, to assert that compassion is not weakness and brutality is not strength, to dramatize our support for nurturing and life affirming values. And ultimately, we need women and men both to join our voices and roar like a mother tiger in defense of our interconnectedness with all of life, the true ground of peace.

Information on upcoming women's actions can be found on <http://www.codepink4peace.org> or <http://www.unitedforpeace.org> (NOTE: either of the above pages will open in a new browser window.)

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