

Towards a Non-Sexist Peace Movement

by Wendy Wright

The role of feminists in the peace movement is often hotly debated. It can be confusing and difficult to maintain a feminist vision of a non-sexist world while being immersed in the very urgent struggle for nuclear disarmament. Yet such a vision is critical because feminism challenges patriarchal society and it is patriarchal society that both creates and reproduces militarism.

In 1983 I made a conscious decision to put most of my energy as a political activist into the peace movement. This decision came not only from my commitment to do everything possible to save the planet, but also from my commitment to feminism. Feminists in the peace movement make a direct connection between militarism and the oppression of women. It is important that we are there making the connection — if we weren't it wouldn't be made. We also insist that sexism within society not be reproduced within the peace movement and work towards making a non-sexist peace movement a reality.

In this article I will look at the effect a feminist analysis has had on the broad peace movement. I will be drawing on my experiences within the Toronto Disarmament Network and the Canadian Peace Alliance¹ to show that feminists within the peace movement have had a direct impact on the evolution of the movement.

The 1980s have seen unprecedented growth of the peace movement. They have also seen the growth and reorganization of powerful right-wing politics as seen in the elections of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Brian Mulroney. This has resulted in the Cold War being waged with renewed vigor and the arms race growing at a phenomenal and dangerous rate. But apart from the "BAN THE BOMB" days of the 1950s and the anti-Viet Nam War days of the 1960s, the

world movement for nuclear disarmament has never been stronger. As the danger has increased, so has public awareness and outcry. A new peace movement has been born.

The involvement of feminists in the peace movement is certainly not new. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom has its roots in the women's campaign against the First World War. The Congress of Canadian Women, whose mandate includes a commitment to peace, have been active for more than 40 years and the Voice of Women for more than 25. These groups have raised the issue of peace in a way to which women have been able to relate. They have also ensured that issues connecting women and peace have been raised within the broader peace movement.

The recent resurgence of the peace movement has seen a renewed involvement of women. This has meant growth for the existing women's peace groups and the birth of new ones, as well as an increased participation of women in general in the peace movement. Some of these groups have looked at violence against women and violence in society with a clear feminist analysis, and then have linked the need for peace with violence in general. Other peace groups have been formed by women who often don't consider themselves feminist. For instance, most of the campaigns against war toys have been started by women. These campaigns make the connection between violence and militarism, but have been slower to connect this to women's role in society. This mixture creates an interesting dynamic by bringing together women with a variety of perspectives who normally wouldn't find themselves in the same room, let alone working on the same project.

Women's lack of economic, political

and social power can only exist if society oppresses a proportion of its members. A feminist analysis connects militarization to some of the contradictions and inequalities of society. For example, the Canadian defence budget increases each year. The money that goes to the military comes from cuts to social services — health care, child care, women's shelters, education — areas which hit women the hardest because women make up the majority of the poor.²

Feminists in the peace movement bring an analysis of the role everyday violence plays in the oppression of women. It is the same society which uses the violence of war and nuclear war to oppress everyone.

The role of feminists in this recent growth of the peace movement has been challenging. Not only do we have the ongoing tasks of organizing and carrying out campaigns, but we are committed to ensuring that the traditional roles for women are not reproduced within the peace movement.

Certain difficulties for feminists working within the peace movement are shared with feminists working in any other movement (apart from the women's movement). Feminists come to the peace movement critical of traditional roles for women and demanding that these be altered, both across society and in the organizations where we work. Working with men who are committed to being non-sexist can be trying enough, but coupled with working with non-feminist women and more traditional men — who see no connection between feminism and peace — we often find our commitment to non-violence taxed!

Although the vision of a reorganized economic system which would meet human needs, such as housing and day-care, is largely shared by the women's and peace movements, we often feel frus-

trated at constantly dealing with issues which are not of specific concern to women. And at times there is a tendency to expect the peace movement to adopt the concerns of the women's movement. This isn't always easy or possible in a movement organized around demands and goals which are not specific to women. All feminist demands cannot be the demands of the peace movement, but feminists within the peace movement have demanded that the movement be anti-sexist in its organization and structure.

A recent poll by the United Nations indicated that 70% of all peace workers are women. However, women are by no means in the majority when it comes to leadership positions within the peace movement. This is a problem we have been addressing fairly consistently for several years now. The primary focus of feminists has been to ensure gender parity. As spokespeople, staff people, as conference delegates and in all public aspects we have insisted on a balance of women. This is critical as it affects how women are seen — as capable, intelligent, skilled people.

In its early years, the coordinating committee (the only elected body) of the Toronto Disarmament Network did not have equal representation of women. Out of feminists' need for support and the belief that this would be the best way we could organize from within, we formed a women's committee. The women's committee began as a support group in which we originally discussed issues, then later agreed upon specific concerns within the Toronto Disarmament Network, and finally developed a plan of action. In 1986 we successfully organized a campaign for the organization's structure document to require a minimum of 50% women on the coordinating committee. This means that the issue of gender parity is now accepted in this important aspect of the Toronto Disarmament Network's work.

This has not been limited to the Toronto Disarmament Network; it has happened across the country. The Structure Document of the Canadian Peace Alliance, which was formed two and a half years ago, has a clause stating that gender parity will be worked for. Feminists within the organization have insisted on gender parity at all levels. All steering committee meetings and conventions have male and

female co-chairs. To ensure that women are heard at conventions the floor microphones alternate between male and female speakers. Points of sexism, a version of points of order, can be raised at steering committee meetings. As a means of institutionalizing these gains a feminist committee of the Canadian Peace Alliance is currently drafting a statement of purpose to be presented to the women's caucus of the next convention in June of this year.

For me, the most important contribution of feminists to the peace movement has been consensus decision-making. Consensus is a radical departure from the traditional method of settling questions by majority vote. Consensus as an out-

reflect a shared analysis of the caucus, but rather a common experience reflecting our oppression as women and our need for support. Often the feminists in these meetings are able to develop a strong commitment to certain basic issues.

Feminists have brought more than an analysis of women's oppression to the peace movement. We have brought practical skills. Many women have excellent organizing skills and experience gained in the women's movement. Feminists who have been active in other social movements bring experience in maintaining a feminist vision.

The work of feminists is on-going. We have accomplished much within the peace movement and have established

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come of debate and disagreement has deep roots in the women's movement. Criticisms of power and power relationships are the base of feminist analysis. Consensus comes out of an attempt to reorganize power so that it is shared, rather than wielded. Consensus decision making has been critical in maintaining a broadly based, representative peace movement. Although extremely difficult to carry out in large groups such as national conferences, consensus has been critical within coalitions (particularly in the process of founding the Canadian Peace Alliance). Consensus has ensured a basis of unity which doesn't always make everyone happy, but does provide a framework everyone can live with.

Many peace groups have a women's committee; most conferences have a women's caucus. These caucuses are important because they clarify for feminists that our work is not just to change men's attitudes but to challenge patriarchy itself. Tensions within women's caucuses are numerous: they include women who consider themselves to be any variety of feminist and women who consider themselves to be anything but.

Sometimes a somewhat confused sense of unity emerges which doesn't so much

strong links across the country. Through the Canadian Peace Alliance we share information concerning peace and experiences and information as feminists. This makes for a strong women's movement — and peace movement — in Canada. Although as feminists we have established certain ground rules within our peace organizations, we still need to carry these further. The peace movement needs to ensure that gains by women are enshrined.

Feminists in the peace movement have experienced frustrations, as has the movement as a whole. Regardless of these problems, we have continued to grow and develop more sophisticated organizing abilities. We have built a strong base — in the streets, in our activities and in public opinion. We have affected the public view, not only of peace but of the peace movement itself.

Decision-makers have been forced to recognize the peace movement as well-informed and as representing a broad segment of society. Feminists and women in general have contributed a great deal to this broad representation. Women have been active in all aspects of organizing the movement and have brought skill, commitment and an analysis linking mili-

tarism to the oppression of women.

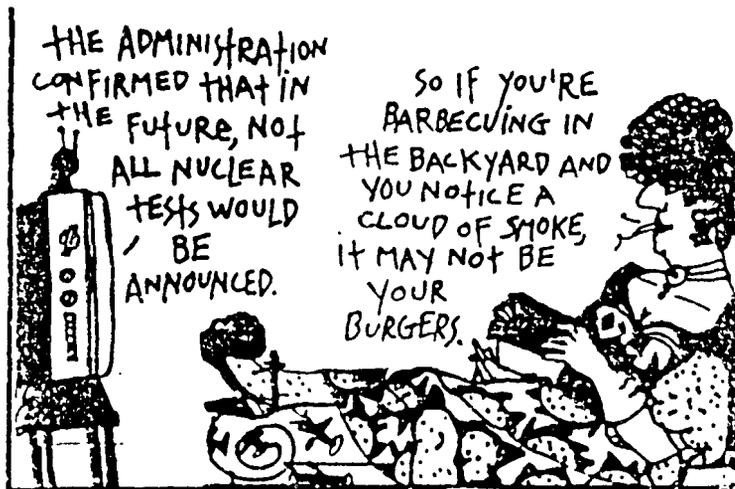
Historically — especially in light of the urgency of the current situation — these successes appear minimal. But they are important as a beginning. The greatest challenge lies ahead: ridding the world of nuclear weapons and creating new problem-solving alternatives to the military model. It is up to us, though, to ensure that the world continues to exist, in order that this can happen.

¹In 1981 the Toronto Disarmament Network was formed by 15 groups. It has developed into an umbrella organization of 85 peace and community groups which organizes the major campaigns and events in Toronto and provides a networking function for its members. During the time the Toronto Disarmament Network developed, the same thing was happening across Canada. Out of two national campaigns — the Peace Petition Caravan Campaign of 1984 and the Stop Star Wars Campaign of 1985 — the base and commitment was created for the Canadian Peace Alliance, formed two and a half years ago. Membership in the Canadian Peace Alliance is now four hundred member groups. These include all the national peace groups, local groups and the Canadian Labour Congress. Today there is a peace movement in virtually every community in Canada.

²In the spring of 1987 the Mulroney government released a White Paper on Defense. The policy outlined in this paper represents a significant change in Canadian defence and foreign policy. It calls for Canada to be more closely tied to US strategic defence (US nuclear-war fighting strategy); states that arms control agreements have proven ineffective; and proposes spending 7.5 billion dollars on nuclear-powered, hunter-killer submarines. The worst thing about these submarines is not that they will be twelve to fifteen floating Chernobyls, or that the 7.5 billion dollars would build one hundred thousand homes, but that they are part of the nuclear war-fighting strategies of the US and NATO.

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