

Through Conflict to a

ANNE GOODMAN AND ANNA SNYDER

Les femmes activistes pour la paix font souvent face à des conflits à l'intérieur de leurs organisations surtout quand elles travaillent ensemble outre-frontières. Les auteures suggèrent

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que travailler à régler avec succès les conflits, utiliser les principes et les pratiques valables pour bâtir la paix, non seulement renforcent l'importance des principes, mais aident à forger une identité commune à tous les pacifistes.

Anne Goodman (AG): We're sitting at Anna's kitchen table having a metalogue, to use Gregory Bateson's term. A metalogue is a conversation in which the interaction exemplifies the subject matter, making it appropriate for our topic which is the way women peace activists develop an identity as peacemakers through dialogue and dealing with conflict. Anna's research deals with international women's peace coalitions, and I've had experience locally, nationally and internationally. Also, while we're both women peace activists, we don't always see things in exactly the same way. So we thought a dialogue would be a good way to explore our common experiences and the points where we agree and disagree, and to thus expand our understanding.

Anna Snyder (AS): My research was on how women's peace organizations worked together and dealt with conflict at the NGO Forum of the United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China in 1995. At the conference, the women attempted to find common ground by developing global policies regarding women and armed conflict. As they worked together, they came into conflict. Some of their differences represented long-standing conflicts concerning race and ethnicity. The conflicts were triggered in part because of the power dynamics that came into play as they made decisions about their priorities as a network. Some of the women felt that their voices were not heard; they were dissatisfied with their ability to participate in the informal NGO decision-making process.

Under any circumstances, it would have been a challenge for so many NGOs from different regions to come to some agreement on their priorities. Even though they had a common goal of bringing about peace in their own countries and around the world, they dealt with such different issues in their everyday lives. So they had a very challenging task and in the process of completing that task, deep-rooted conflicts were triggered. Plus they had very little time. Their resources were limited so some could only stay at the conferences for a few days. Some of the issues were very pressing; the women felt the survival of their people was at stake. All of this put pressure on the decision making process.

I found that when the women were able to use conflict constructively, they began to feel they had something in common as women peacemakers and started to feel "Okay I'm with a group of women that I want to be a part of, that I want to identify with."

AG: The women in Beijing came from many different places and conflict situations and had many aspects of identity: nationality, religion, class, ethnicity and relations to the struggles. We are looking at just one aspect of their identity; one they had in common, that of women as peacemakers.

I've had an experience in organizing across international boundaries that backs up what you say. In 1985, my group, Voice of Women (VOW), held a women's peace conference at Mount St. Vincent's University in Halifax that brought together women from about 35 different countries. Our organizing committee decided not to produce conference resolutions, since we felt that no one took much notice of them. However, a group of women from El Salvador saw the resolutions as being very important. It was during the civil war, and the women had arranged for a special broadcast through an alternative radio station. The women at the conference rearranged the format to accommodate the women from El Salvador and it helped to develop a greater sense of what our ideals really mean when we put them into practice.

Conflict gives an opportunity to check out assumptions, since we may have assumptions we're not aware of until we're confronted with difference.

AS: Yes, we do make assumptions when we organize. The Northern group organizing the peace activities at the Beijing conference assumed that conflict in groups is negative or destructive and that difference could divide

Peacemaker Identity

the group. Some of the NGOs, like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), had had experience with how divisive conflict can be in an organization. And they had seen at past conferences how controversial issues like Zionism could dominate the proceedings. So they assumed that deep-rooted conflicts should be ignored when it came time to make decisions because they felt they had very little time or resources to deal with them. During the decision making process (they used consensus) conflict and difference were suppressed.

Some of the women felt marginalized and confronted the organizers, resulting in awareness that the decision making process was not working well for all the participants. Issues important to some of the NGO delegates were left off the list of priorities. Once the Northern organizers did decide to enter into dialogue or simply changed what they were doing to allow for participation and diversity in the process, the conflicts were dealt with constructively. As a result, some of the women who had felt marginalized said their collaboration with the Northern organizers was satisfactory. When they put into action their peacemaking skills, they reinforced their desire to work together as women peace activists.

AG: When choosing processes, we should bear in mind that informal consensus decision making may be great for small groups where everyone has the same assumptions, background and experiences, but may be less ideal for large groups, especially where the members don't know each other and have different experiences. While it may seem democratic and open, it could be coercive if it doesn't pay enough attention to differences. Perhaps we need to develop models that have a bit more structure so there are opportunities for input of ideas around issues we hadn't thought of.

The reality of women's day-to-day lives, and their lack



Anna Snyder and Anne Goodman. Photo: Stephanie Kroeker

of time, money and access to decision-making bodies, makes it difficult for women to meet, especially across international boundaries. Without a baseline of shared experiences and assumptions, consensus decision-making takes a long time. It's amazing, really, that the peace movement women in Beijing were able to reach consensus in the limited time they had, given that they had to get through the chaotic, difficult phase first.

These are not problems only faced in international coalitions. In Canada, for instance, large geographical distances make it difficult for women to meet, too, a problem we've faced in VOW. It's a structural issue that becomes clearer the more women talk about their experiences.

AS: When we talk about organizing women across divides then we need to talk about power. Who decides what it means to be peaceful or what peace issues are? At the same time, I think there is some responsibility for those of us with more power and access to resources in certain settings to be aware of our assumptions and this does not always happen.

Rather than starting a process of dialogue at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, the Northern organizers defined a peace agenda focusing on North American/Western European regional concerns and past areas of consensus in Nairobi at the UN World Confer-

ence ten years earlier. Another example was a group of Northern Sudanese women, allied to the government, who tried to obtain a peace agreement with Southern Sudanese women based on their own state-defined terms. They attempted to build bridges with the Southern Sudanese women, appealing to their identities as women peacemakers. But the peace agreement did not deal with issues of concern to the Southern Sudanese group who was interested in talking about a "just peace." Their common identity as women peace-builders broke down. Their ethnic and religious identities became much more salient and the peacemaking efforts of Northern Sudanese women heightened their conflict.

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AG: At the Halifax conference, women from conflict zones made impassioned statements and the first reaction of those of us not in the middle of wars was of wanting to help. The women insisted that wasn't what they needed; they would do the work in the area, but that we all needed to work from wherever we're situated. Women of the North should not become immobilized by guilt. Rather, women everywhere should work on whatever aspect of the global *problématique* we have influence on, and in that way we can help each other in meaningful rather than patronizing ways. Our struggles are not the same, but they are all aspects of the same issue.

We as peace activists, researchers and educators love the idea of peace, but it can be used oppressively. In South Africa, during apartheid, peace was seen as a dirty word because it was tied to law and order. I was recently in Israel and Palestine doing research, and the Israelis talk of peace with security while the Palestinians talk of peace with justice. But peace is indivisible; a peace that's going to work will have to include both justice and security.

One of the great contributions of peace studies is that of the multiple dimensions of peace; notions of negative peace, for example, which is just the absence of direct violence, whereas positive peace addresses structural imbalances. Women find they are not necessarily talking about the same thing when they talk about peace, and peace studies can give the activist community a language to conceptualize the differences as aspects of a larger whole.

AS: In my research, some of the women peace activists confronted each other and some did not. What is the value of confrontation within movements or organiza-

tions? Is confronting a "peaceful" thing to do? The assumption with consensus is that everyone has equal power or can speak in the same way or use the language equally effectively. That's not necessarily true, so how do you get to a place where there is shared access to decision-making and more power sharing. I think awareness-raising and confrontation are sometimes necessary. Confrontation can be a pathway to a just process within peace organizations because it can result in more symmetrical power relations.

AG: In situations of power imbalance, there needs to be a conscientization process both for the groups with less power and those with more. One of the most pervasive and invisible forms of violence is people's internalized view of themselves. People may see themselves as powerless, or not even see change as necessary.

Peace is disruptive. The larger social order is not peaceful so that any time we raise issues of peace we challenge the status quo and this is true within organizations too. Confrontation may not necessarily be the best way; the question is how to develop processes that acknowledge that people have different experiences, and elicit those experiences as part of the process.

AS: Working across international lines requires finding common meaning. I noticed women at the conferences not only struggling with power asymmetry but with trying to find common language. What speaks to so many different activists coming from different cultural/social and political contexts? A British activist of African descent representing some small local NGOs wanted police brutality on the network's peace agenda. She tried talking about anti-racism. Anti-racism got the attention of other women but she still didn't get police brutality on the agenda. She spoke about the "black agenda" but that notion was too identity based and didn't communicate effectively to a larger group unaware of the context. The specific issue of police brutality tended to get lost at the conference. On the other hand, a Pacific Island representative talked about "de-colonization, de-militarization, and de-nuclearization." The Northern peace activists could relate strongly to some of these issues even though the concepts were put together in a new way. They would not have thought to connect de-colonization with de-nuclearization, something that is essential in the Pacific Islands where colonial powers have done so much nuclear testing. Finding common political agendas and forging alliances transnationally across cultural, ethnic, ideological, and regional divides is a big challenge.

AG: The woman you talked about was frustrated because somehow there was no frame for her particular issue in the language of the document. In Beijing, the women worked to develop a final document that was broad and inclusive enough without being so vague as to be meaningless. It can't talk about every little issue.

AS: There are many different kinds of women's peace alliances or networks. The Beijing network was just one—

I can think of at least three different types of alliances across barriers. First of all, Northern and Southern Sudanese women or Israeli and Palestinian women reach across the divide of war, across enemy lines to build peace as women. Another kind of alliance is organizing around a specific project like at the Fourth World Conference on Women/NGO Forum '95. The women worked together to generate global policies related to women and armed conflict. Another example of this type of alliance is the East Asia-U.S. Women's Network against U.S. Militarism. They are joining together to come up with joint strategies to address sex workers outside U.S. military bases. A third type of alliance is networking to build international solidarity. The International Fellowship of Reconciliation has organized conferences for women peace activists, like their regional conference held in Asia in 1998. So women, who are all peace activists using nonviolence and who are interested in sharing resources and training, come together. There is potential for finding a common project but the goal is really solidarity rather than finding one strategy or project. So the purposes of these three types of networks are very different. We need to think about the goals of our alliances. Why are we getting together as women?

AG: That's a wonderful summary of the different types of alliances and how they organize! Going back to the issues of assumptions we spoke about earlier: when women organize across enemy lines, they are very much aware there are differences to be transcended, whereas if women are organizing with a group they expect to be like-minded, conflicts may take people by surprise.

The book, *The Aftermath* (Meintjies, Pilay and Turshen), which I reviewed for this journal, describes armed conflicts as opportunities for women to expand their roles. There are many positions women can take including being combatants, providing weapons or food, or supporting men in armed conflict through traditional roles. The group we're teasing out is a sub-set of a sub-set: women who see themselves as peacemakers.

Women develop identities as peacemakers in different ways. One chapter describes how women transformed the traditional role of mothers into a political act by caring not only for their own families but for all families, including those of the "enemy." Reading this, I reframed an experience of my own, a project supplying essential toiletries to women on all sides during the war in former Yugoslavia. At the time we saw it as a humanitarian project; now I understand it as a political act we as Canadian women undertook by transcending "enemy" lines and refusing to treat any group as the "other." So I see first-hand how important dialogue can be in changing women's consciousness so they see themselves as powerful and able to change situations.

AS: As women, our identities are multi-layered and hyphenated. We cannot assume that all women are peace-builders or conflict-resolvers at all times. Organizational

decision making processes validate identity. When we focus on process, we look at values and principles. Some values that women peacemakers may share are conflict resolution, reconciliation, dialogue, participation and diversity. These are things they haven't necessarily experienced in organizations they have been a part of or with their governments, so they may hold these principles very dear.

A study done by Benchmark Environmental Consulting in 1996 shows that the vast majority of NGOs attending UN World Conferences felt the process of participation and decision making among the NGOs was just as important if not more important than the

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policies they were working on. The study was not framed in term of identity but I think it is key to identity—who we think we are. As peace builders, we are trying to do things differently, in a better way. It's something we are passionate about as women, as activists, as peacemakers. It becomes discouraging when the process does not validate who we are. My research showed that attempts to resolve network conflicts and structured dialogue, that is, conversations where the women try to gain mutual understanding, reinforced their shared values. Even though they experienced some painful conflict, they continued to want to work together as women peace builders.

AG: There isn't always a clear distinction between policy and process. In the UN Culture of Peace program of action, hierarchical, top-down decision-making is seen as inimical to a culture of peace. Conversely, it recognizes that if we are to develop a peaceful world, people, and especially women, will need to be involved in making decisions on issues of concern. Process is not a frill or an add-on; it's foundational.

As women deal successfully with conflicts using values like conflict resolution and inclusivity, this not only reinforces that the principles are good ones but it's part of developing a sense of self as people who act on their beliefs. Identities form in praxis.

In my research project on community-based peace-building, I've discovered a common sense of identity in people doing this work no matter where they are situated, a commonality that transcends national boundaries and that has to do with doing the work and having shared values. The more opportunities we have to share our experiences and insights, the more inclusive our picture of what it means to be a peacemaker will become.

Reflective postscript

We found that the dialogue did indeed work the way we'd hoped, in allowing us to discover things we didn't know in advance, very much like the process that is the subject of our discussion.

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LOLETTE KUBY

Our Gift

Make small cuts in male viaducts,
nips and tucks in oviducts
and it is over.
Little pain, little blood.
Everything done for estate will stop.
Everything done for monument will stop.
All reasons but the reasons of grass
will stop.
After a brief yesterday, all
will be mosses, feathers, claws, clouds.
Rain will be rain, wind, wind.
Absented of us
all will be a holy rolling,
a whirling, a quaking.
After our compassionate abandonment
trackless as a flight of birds.

Lolette Kuby's book of poems, Set Down Here, was published by Brandylane (Richmond, Virginia) in 2002.

CHERIE HANSON

Totem Child

Father flat beneath a slab in California
I am told.
Only rumors, his name never spoken
I wear him in my body.
Never say it, nameless Shaman.
Bruised decoratively
hidden in my crib, my bed
from eyes, from school
waiting for the fading.
And bone deep
I wear his jewelry:
a neck ring restricts my turning vision
the vertebrate tattooed with cracks.
The fury of his hands pulled my sections
one from another
separating self-from-self
I left myself for him.
The fury of his hands
strangled me from my form,
jerking my body backwards
incapable of doing any more than going limp
watching my own trailing helpless legs and
arms
along the childhood hallways.
As if an afterthought, my collar bone
out of line, unattended under four year clothing
a healed shard sticks up defiantly.
My reformed nose asymmetric sculpted to his
fist
remade me in the image
of his own abuse:
His father's touch along his young boy's body.
I was totem-molded
to his rage.
The family demon spirit renewed.
I am the vessel for his rage
rigid in an unsafe crib
a baby listening for my maker's steps
coming to remake me for his uses
his passing presence marked in x-rays
as puzzled doctors hold me up
to light.

Cherie Hanson's writing appears in the anthology Love Poems for the Media Age (Ripple Effect Press). She is a graduate of the University of British Columbia where she completed a Masters in English with a concentration in contemporary poetry.