
WEAPONS OF PEACE

Ritu Menon

Years ago, and long before the rest of the world woke up to the vicious extremism of the Taliban, the international women's movement called attention to their shocking and systematic assault on women in Afghanistan. We forged links with the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, petitioned the UN and its 189 member countries, lobbied with national governments and appealed to the world community to impose sanctions on that regime for its severe curtailment of women's human rights. To no avail. There were riches in them hills, and although most of the "civilised" world didn't recognise the Taliban, pipeline-politics meant they didn't want to rock their boat, either. After all, nothing much was at stake—only women. Even the media weren't terribly interested.

That was peace-time. But women know that for them, the weapons of war are not too different from weapons in peace, that they form part of a continuum of violence that is deeply entrenched and more or less universally sanctioned. Because, as Yugoslavian feminist Rada Ivekovic says, the globalisation of patriarchy is the first of all globalisations; and because women are the first Other within a community. They embody the very principle of mixture—which is the basis of life in biological terms, and of culture in social terms.

They thus represent a dangerous potential for dilution of the "pure," and ethnic purity is an article of faith for the community. They must be controlled, through violence if necessary.

These and other thoughts kept flashing through my mind like staccato machine-gun fire as we drove through Sri Lanka to Trincomalee just a couple of weeks ago. The countryside around Trinco is achingly beautiful, deserted for the most part now. For the last 90 kms. or so it is punctuated by military police checkpoints, sandbagged and barricaded, on either side of the road. On either side, too, upto 200 metres of land has been clear-felled, so that a barren waste stretches away almost as far as the eye can see.

Trincomalee in north-eastern Sri Lanka is one-third Sinhala, one-third Tamil and one-third Muslim, and half of it is controlled by the LTTE. Our regional meeting on women's peace activism was deliberately located in a place which has seen protracted violence and terrorism for two decades now. The tension was palpable. Less than 50 yds. from where we were staying was the burnt-out husk of another hotel that had failed to keep the Tigers happy. We were advised not to stray too far on our evening walks because, after sundown, it was a free for all.

Trinco, in the third week of September this year, must have been one of the few places in the world where Afghanistan, the Taliban and bin Laden were not on everyone's mind. They had been displaced by the Tigers. Apprehension ran high. We didn't know whether women from Batticaloa or the other districts would be able to make it—there had been a massive recruitment of children in Batticalao the week before, and an attack was imminent. If word got out that our group was discussing terrorism or human rights or violence, there could be trouble.

Sri Lankan women who are in the frontline of peace-work and war-resistance are light years ahead of the rest of us in the region in dealing with terrorism. And again, as with Afghani women, most of the "civilised" world has left them to handle it alone. Women in Batticaloa and Trincomalee must report to local Tiger leaders once a month, inform them of the monies they receive for humanitarian and peace activities, give them an account of how they propose to use that money, and of the projects they initiate. Many of them are on the Tigers' hit list for daring to put up posters asking for an end to the war. Many have died because they refused to submit.

They question "peace," too. "Each time there's a 'peace accord' between the government and the Tigers," they said, "we see even greater violence." Women in Pakistan fear that, post the bombing of Afghanistan, the Taliban will merely relocate to Pakistan, and then all hope of "peace" for women will vanish. "Peace" in military-and-mullah speak means: don't jeopardise national security, don't challenge religious custom, don't protest gender inequality and discrimination. Who suffers from that "peace" which is a sentimentalised suppression of resistance? Women. We're allergic to it, they said. What we want is a guarantee that women's rights will be protected and that peace will be democratic. A resolution signed in June 2001 by NEGAR, an organisation of over 300 Afghani women in exile, said exactly the same.

Bush-men or cave-men, their idiom is the same. Both terrorism and counter-terrorism share the same language, are part of the same masculinist discourse. It's a macho do, as someone said, a war-gasm. No room in it for non-violence. Each side decries the morally grotesque—the killing of innocents, the sanctions against children, the purveying of "evil"—then endorses the morally ambiguous. A just war. Crusade. Jihad. A fight to death. Kill the bastards. But women working for peace ask: can there be an "acceptable" counter-terrorism if it pretends to act in self-defence? Is terrible violence justified if it is in the "national interest" or for national "security"? How is it that under-18s can't fight, but over-18s can?

Brotherhoods—whether of the Taliban, of NATO, the Northern Alliance, the IRA, Hamas, the RSS or the Tigers, whether religious or ethnic—are by definition paternalistic and patriarchal. They affirm the deep comradeship of men and are rarely emancipatory for women because they are rarely genuinely democratic.

Women in Batticaloa say peace for them is: a home, coconut trees, water, men without uniforms. Women have a stake in peace not because they are mothers and nurturers, but because they know oppression, and they know violence. They have first-hand experience of the connected forms of domestic, communal and political violence that stretches from the home to the street, and

into the battlefield. Their historical exclusion from structures of power, both private and public, and their experience of subjugation gives them a stake in working for peace, justice and democracy, for it is only through all three that they will be able to realize their right to equality. A feminist culture of peace fundamentally critiques structures of domination and is built on learning to live with difference, without aggression.

The Taliban are generally credited with having "imposed (!) absolute peace" on 90% of the country under their control, and for ensuring that women are "safe"—such are the weapons of a peace predicated on violence. ■

Ritu Menon is the co-editor of Kali for Women

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