

Engendering discussion of violence and nonviolence

Rob Fairmichael talks about gender, masculinity, nonviolence and violence, following a course he attended in December 2009 with the Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) in the Netherlands on “**Overcoming Violence - Exploring Masculinities, Violence and Peace**”.

This is followed by the “**Call to Men and Boys**” put together by the group.

Introduction

“Sounds like it’s for wimps” was one comment I heard indirectly concerning the statement which the group of men, of which I was part, issued. Yes, certainly, if the word ‘wimps’ (usually understood as weak, ineffective half-men who can’t stand up for themselves) is redefined as men who have been bravely counter-cultural where standing up with something different to say can at best lead to ridicule and at worst be life-threatening, men who have lived in brutal conflict and post-conflict situations, lived with military rule, been tortured, or made refugees, to mention but a few problems a number have had to deal with with, and still stood up for nonviolence and justice.

The concept of transformative power (as in the Alternatives to Violence Project) is one which deserves much exploration in this regard; power with, not power over, and relationships which defy the divide and rule policies of many governments and accepted approaches to power and conflict at any level of life.

The statement or call [see copy at end of this report and also at http://www.ifor.org/WPP/Together%20forTransformation-ACalltoMenandBoys_final.pdf] which was adopted was written in the context of, as we were asked to do, thinking of women ‘first’. Men have a long history of not considering women in the equation and there is a danger in men getting involved in this area that we simply exercise another takeover bid. The statement was written trying to avoid that but it does state quite clearly that men have much to gain from better relations between the genders. The Dutch men’s group (The Kitchen Table) that visited did two brainstorm lists with the group – what men do for women, and what men do for themselves (self interest) in this change work; awareness of both is important, indeed essential.

The nineteen men who gathered in Egmond aan Zee, a seaside town north of Amsterdam, were brought together by the Women Peacemakers Program (IFOR/International Fellowship of Reconciliation) who previously had run intensive training for women in nonviolence. Now, wanting to build male allies, it was the turn of men to be offered training; I was able to slide in to the group thanks to coming from a (current or former?) ‘conflict area’, Northern Ireland, although all of us were facilitators or trainers. Participants came mainly from Africa, Asia and the Pacific; there was just one guy from the Americas, and one European (myself).

This was a new course but in general it ran exceedingly smoothly with facilitation from Patricia Ackerman and Steven Botkin (both of the USA), and very thorough back up from WPP, during the course mainly through José de Vries who was notetaker, logistical problem solver, and all round support. The friendly environment in the small Golfzang Hotel, open just for us, added to the bonhomie and relaxed learning atmosphere. Patricia and Steven, as facilitators, had a wealth of experience and knowledge between them which they shared as appropriate; Patricia was able to draw on her feminist and peacemaking experience, and Steven on many years working with men, in the USA and in a variety of other countries – he was able to share very positive experiences in situations where men might perhaps not be thought to be concerned about the position of women. Steven is director of Men’s Resources International www.mensresourcesinternational.org

Den Haag

We spent a day at the Palace of Peace in The Hague/Den Haag at a conference on “Women in War Zones”. This was an official, international conference involving Dutch and Swedish governments, and the Women Peacemakers program was also part of it, which is how we were there. This was a fascinating experience for us all and in a particular way for those of us active in nonviolent social change movements, to be listening to, and interacting with to a lesser extent, people from the Dutch and Swedish military as well as others from civil society, although there is the question of how it all gelled together

In this conference, the Dutch military were priding themselves on increasing the number of women in their ranks, and senior ranks (I sat beside a woman being fast-tracked for rapid promotion); this may alter slightly the way military power is exercised but does not change its fundamental nature. If minorities such as gay people or ethnic groups, or a majority or equality (to coin a phrase) like women are well included in the military, it may indeed make that institution more sensitive and better able to do ‘its job’. But the fact that there is an all-female (two woman) Tornado aircraft crew with the British Royal Air Force in Afghanistan does not alter the nature of the war there and it can actually be used to

justify it through embellishing the perception that the British war presence there is 'sensitive'. The military use all sorts of PR to project a good image – I remember a photo in the 'Belfast Telegraph' a couple of decades ago of the British army in Northern Ireland making thicker potato chips, supposedly promoting healthier eating (but really promoting the British Army as a 'caring', positive institution)!

Topics and programme

Some tough topics were dealt with during the course, and tough news came through from 'home' – bombs killing a hundred in one home city, or martial law in another's home situation, and at a personal level the death of a sibling of one participant (with no possibility of getting home for the funeral the next day). These were all difficult to deal with in different ways.

Tough topics tackled included those of prostitution, and rape. Prostitution was not understood in a simplistic way, and the legality and visibility of it in the Netherlands put the issue in a particular context. But it was clearly understood that while legality might lead to it being easier to support women involved and make them safer, it could also further the objectification of women. And illegal, off-the-radar, prostitution also exists in the Netherlands where trafficking can be as much an issue as elsewhere. The session between the WPP men's group and visiting women from Dutch women's groups included caucus sessions drawing up questions to ask each other, and this included the reason how or why men could rape. I'm not sure that in the men's group we had any easy answers but it felt, and rightly so while still being in a supportive atmosphere, uncomfortable to confront that issue. We weren't being tarred by that brush but we do share a gender with rapists (or almost all rapists).

We had been expected to prepare well before the training, speaking to both men and women locally in semi-structured interviews to provide an important context for our work. Patricia Ackerman gave us a summary of the points made by women interviewed in this process, as fed to the facilitators:

1. Men want to take the leading role and not listen to women's point of view
2. [Men need] To not see women as competitors
3. [Men need] To practise what they preach
4. Women's rights are human rights
5. For women and men to work as allies
6. To change the stereotype that women are weak
7. To work against Gender Based Violence (GBV) and not be violent.

The points that stayed with me from my interview with women beforehand were about men using their power positively, and about not feeling 'special' to engage in this work. The latter point relates to 1. and 2. above. My understanding is that while we can be excited and enthused by this work, to start feeling we are 'special' men is dangerous because that route can lead to arrogance and superiority – either over other men, or over women. We're men who want to confront the gender-based roots of violence because we believe it is important (for differing and equally valid reasons). Full stop. And we men have to accept that we carry sexism with us at different levels, even if intellectually we reject it, in the same way as 'we' carry racism (and if you don't believe this statement, just try a 'first thoughts' exercise in these areas where we don't have time to edit and vet our deeply ingrained and even subconscious thinking).

A concern I had before going was whether the course would address the issues and interests I had in relation to the topic, given that I was the only European and the only Westerner. I need not have worried because the situation of those present were so divergent in many, many ways that we were all in the same boat of relating the course to our own situations, and some bits fitted different people better at different times. The situation concerning women in the societies we came from varied extremely widely, and the norms for interaction between women and men. The point was well made by one participant in stressing culture sensitivity as well as gender sensitivity. I would say, not just culture sensitivity but also cultural awareness, awareness of people's culture and history.

A point here, nothing particularly to do with gender, is that we do well not to stereotype any people. The Pashtun/Pukhtoon people of Pakistan and Afghanistan are today stereotyped because of the Taliban. Who helped to create the Taliban as a real force ('the West' against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan) is one important question here. But even more revealing is the fact that the 'Frontier Gandhi', Abdul Ghaffar Khan (Bacha Khan) who was a 'Gandhi before Gandhi' (starting his campaign in 1910) was a Pashtun; "He started his struggle on three main fronts: against the religious leaders to get modern education, against the traditional leaders' exploitation of the poor and against the British government to get independence. He worked against these with a one hundred thousand strong organized Army, the Servants of God, the world's first and last nonviolent army, and with a strong Jirga (council of elders) in the center for policy matters." (from *'Pukhtoon traditions in modern perspective.'*) And this was Pashtun men being nonviolent.

I still have lots of questions about gender, violence and nonviolence. I feel I need to learn much more about feminism and the correlation and possible differences between feminist, nonviolent and green values. I learned a significant amount but I think it is partly a matter that my questions are now better informed. I think it is also an issue of how

questions are phrased. One way of phrasing a question regarding women and violence is why and how women are violent, or can be violent, in the same or different ways to men. But equally, and I would argue more perceptively, you can ask why men are often violent in a way that women tend not to be. And the answer to this lies substantially, I believe, in the culture of machismo even more than in any difference of physical strength between men and women. We can change culture, we can work so that violence is seen as an inappropriate and inadequate response, we can emulate some cultures where men are not, or have not been, warriors and wallopers (those who hit others).

We did have a session looking at militarism and masculinity. Isabelle Geuskens drew on some Northern Irish examples such as a guy who stated that joining the paramilitaries meant he was a man; being 'a man' meant being willing to die and kill, and a 'real man' even accepted, by appointment, a paramilitary punishment shooting. I would identify military-type thinking as a key element in the continuation of macho attitudes and thus in the total screw-ups like the Iraq or Afghanistan wars. But this is not a simple matter of the military or paramilitaries being 'bad'; while they are actors in their own right, the military are as much a symptom of society's approach to conflict as anything (and they may be more cautious regarding war and violence than political leaders - for example, if the British military had a choice on the war in Iraq they would probably have said 'no' or at least 'Give us much more time to prepare'). Part of the problem is the failure of imagination, and recourse to militarism, when 'the going gets tough', very eloquently represented recently by Tony Blair during the inquiry in Britain into the Iraq war; if we don't seek then we certainly won't find nonviolent alternatives.

Christina Reyna led a session on gender mainstreaming, and one of the most pertinent issues raised was that of tokenism, and simply giving gender issues a mention to help access funding. She shared a simple tool of analysing needs and benefits under the headings of access and control as a way of developing a gender lens and power relationships. And the term 'empowerment' in one African society was described by a participant as a way for men to opt out and leave issues to women, in the same way as 'gender issues' are taken to imply 'women's issues' which men can ignore.

But to label women 'weak', possibly extrapolating from physical differences, is extremely facile; how can you label as 'weak' the gender who goes through childbirth, who endures what women have to endure, and who can stand up in the way many women stand up for rights of all kinds, or taking the kind of courageous action detailed by Gulnara Shahinian in working to overcome inter-ethnic/inter-national violence in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. During the course, Dorothy Attema of WPP led an exercise where she shared a couple of examples of women's strength from Africa. And indeed, if we were to consider ability to deal with emotional issues, then women would be labelled the 'stronger' sex.

The exercises and sessions which we had in the training were many and varied, and I am not attempting to cover them all here; they included a variety of ways of working in pairs and small groups, drama and body sculpting, input from the facilitators, analytical and imaginative tools, brainstorming, sharing in plenary session, meeting with others, spectrums/barometers and a 'common ground' exercise (the last 'Who shares with me...?'), video and so on. If I was asked my ideal length for a training I would always say 'ten days', partly humorously because I never get it or anything like it, but also because in a serious way there is a sense in which that kind of time allows many different aspects of a situation or issue to be unpacked.

But by the time we added weekend programme of a visit to Amsterdam and participants' own short inputs from their own situations, plus a day at the Den Haag conference, we had perhaps 8½ days of facilitator-led programme – and, amazingly, as time went by it, and some of the areas covered, felt too short. For example, while I do use sociodrama in training and facilitation, exploring interactions and relationships to get a better picture of what is going on, at the more personal level of psychodrama I would be reluctant to embark too far without further training. One online source describes the difference between the two approaches, both originally developed by Jacob Moreno; "While psychodrama focuses on the internal interactions of one man [[sic]], sociodrama focuses on individuals in the process of interaction"; the attention in psychodrama is on the individual and their problems, in sociodrama it is individuals in interaction with other individuals. (http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-16342358_ITM) We do however have a return match in the summer when, with some training under our belts, we will meet again with a chance to take things further.

Documentary videos we watched included the powerful 'Praying the devil back to hell' from Liberia, where women took direct action to force negotiators to take the peace process seriously and come to an agreement (Leymah Gbowee who was prominent in this women's movement was a speaker at the Den Haag conference we attended). It was a very powerful example. Another powerful film, in a very different and disturbing way, was 'Weapon of War' which was about male perpetrators of sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo. There was considerable uneasiness for those watching – not least for the 'easy reconciliation' being sought by a now distraught rapist with his victim. The film was made by Ilse and Femke van Velzen and focussed on rapists and perpetrators, and was a follow up to their previous film 'Fighting the Silence – Sexual violence against women in Congo'. Ilse van Velzen and Femke van Velzen

also attended the Den Haag conference and some of the WPP men's group were able to discuss the issues with them there.

Men's acceptance and enjoyment of violence

Why do many males enjoy violent films and (sometimes extremely) violent computer games? Significantly, this happens for many men in a way that most women would find repulsive – and some men would too. Psychologically, what is it that attracts men to violence? I think it is primarily enabling them to feel powerful, and thus good about themselves as in 'self important', but this is definitely 'power over' rather than 'power with', and it is culturally determined. I am not a psychologist or anthropologist but my take on it is that, while there are psychological and physiological elements in the attraction of men to violence, even in fantasy as with computer games, the greatest factor in this is cultural. To put my concept somewhat simplistically, the ancient rise of the warrior state has deeply imbedded violence in our cultures so that we can be attracted to it rather than be sickened by it. To some extent the portrayal of its positivity is restricted to state-sponsored violence (by national armed forces) – or at least states try to restrict it to this - but it spills over into both non-state violence and violence at an interpersonal level. To be violent in a 'just' cause is portrayed as extremely positive; the problem is that everyone comes to consider that they wage a 'just' war, no matter how petty the vendetta they are engaging in.

There are many different answers to these problems. Advancing the concept and knowledge of nonviolent action and struggle is one factor. But challenging and changing the culture which accepts violence is another. And if you accept state-sponsored violence then you are going to have to accept all sorts of other kinds of violence as well since, as I say, everyone feels their cause is 'just', whether at a societal level (conflict internal to a state) or at an interpersonal level. From the Northern Ireland context, but applying it universally, I would also say that what is necessary to overcome violence includes people being strong and satisfied with their own identity; of course this entails a certain level of respect, but few if any of us can have the kind of state we would individually want. How can we stand tall in a world where frequently the main message is 'be small'? And how can we keep our dignity in a state 'which is not of our choosing', either in terms of geographical boundaries or of governments that we profoundly disagree with? This is part of a more general key to living without violence in the modern world.

Conclusions

To build peace, at personal, interpersonal, group, societal and international levels, we do have to bend the 'normal' gender expectations – often expectations from women of men as well as men about themselves – to define manhood in terms of nurturing and caring as well as strength and defence (both of which can be used in positive and nonviolent ways). How that definition will differ from one that women would adopt for themselves remains to be seen. It is not a question of denying physical, psychological or cultural differences between men and women but of looking at what we have and, having decided where we want to get, planning how we get there. A simple exploratory exercise here would be to vision the future we want in relation to gender, violence and nonviolence and then make the connections as to how we get there.

The issues of gender are so ubiquitous that they can be hidden in plain sight. And, some men feel the underdog because, as positions shift and women do make gains, the relative change makes them uncertain and feel that, having lost ground, their position is now actually inferior. A more dispassionate view would judge this to be nonsense, but men can either adjust and benefit from the changes – and work for more - or hark back to a mythical, and in reality violent, golden age for men where they were unfettered by feminism and political correctness. The reality is that, even in Western societies, women still have a long distance to go – in overcoming domestic violence (which is usually men on women but can, in a relatively small percentage of cases, also be the other way around), in feeling secure in public spaces, in full equality in the workplace, equal participation in public life and decision making at all levels, and in the equal participation of men in household tasks.

The cause of peace and nonviolence and the cause of gender equality go hand in hand. But 'gender equality' in an oppressive and/or violent system is not an answer to any problem but another problem to be solved – because it seems more 'equitable' it will be harder to shift.

I will be involved in running training on some aspect or aspects of gender-sensitive active nonviolence in Ireland as part of my commitment to this 'sandwich' course (the second part takes place 6 or 7 months after the first); the thorough back-up from WPP includes linking with a local woman activist as a mentor or adviser. I will be working on this but if anyone feels I could assist them with exploration of the area of gender and violence I would be pleased to look at whether I had anything to offer. As a facilitator/trainer I feel rather better equipped to deal with issues of gender and violence than I was.

To 'engender' is to bring about a situation or create a feeling; I have chosen to include the term as a play on words in the title of this piece, because it could also include the concept to en-gender, to put a gender on something, or perhaps to shine a spotlight on gender. When it comes to violence and nonviolence this is something which we would do well

to ponder because we can learn much not just about men and women but about the nature of violence and nonviolence as well.

- For some photos of the training at Egmond aan Zee on the INNATE photo site, see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/30253151@N07/sets/72157623102190490/>

- For the statement coming from the group, please see following or also http://www.ifor.org/WPP/Together%20forTransformation-ACalltoMenandBoys_final.pdf

- For Women Peacemakers Program see <http://www.ifor.org/WPP/>

Together for Transformation: A Call to Men and Boys

On the occasion of International Human Rights Day, December 10, 2009 we 19 men from 17 countries coming from Africa, Asia, Europe, America, the Middle East and the Pacific gathered here in Egmond aan Zee in the Netherlands for a Training of Trainers on Gender-Sensitive Active Nonviolence, organised by the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, its Women Peacemakers Program, collectively draft this document and express our commitments towards this statement/call.

We understand that men and women are socialised in a patriarchal system that legitimises use of different forms of violence to gain, restore and control power affecting powerless and marginalised sections of society. We fully acknowledge that women suffer far more than men from gender oppression.

We understand and recognize that women have always been active agents of change. Women worldwide are standing up against all forms of discrimination and violence to bring social and gender justice and peace to the world. Some men are standing as allies with women's struggles and notions of dominant masculinities across cultures have posed challenges for gender equality and social justice. Both men and women are suffering in this system and they need to join hands to bring about transformative change. Men also have much to gain in health, general wellbeing and safety through this change.

We believe that all individuals have equal human rights irrespective of their gender, origin, nationality, age, religion, caste, class, race, colour, occupation, physical and mental abilities, and sexualities. All human beings have the right to a dignified life free of threat and discrimination. We assert our commitments to all international conventions and declarations, especially The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Economics Social and Cultural Rights, UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, UN Security Council Resolution 1325, 1820, 1888 and 1889. These need to be fully implemented in their true spirit and further steps need to be taken to improve policies and programs pertaining to women and gender justice.

We strongly speak out against gender inequality and discrimination towards women in all forms and show our deep commitment towards gender sensitive active nonviolence as a way of life. We are inspired by and committed to this work and the prospect of change in our lives and in our societies. We believe in people's capacity to bring transformative change in nonviolent ways.

Therefore we call on all men and boys to:

- Adopt gender-sensitive Active Nonviolence as a way of solving problems
- End violence against women in any form
- Engage in constructive dialogue with women
- Provide space for equal and meaningful participation of women in private and public spheres

- including peace building processes
- Stop militarising resistance and peace processes
 - Promote policies that bring dignity to all people

We call on men and boys to join us on this journey.

Signed,
Gender Sensitive Active Non Violent Men
Women Peacemakers Program Training of Trainers
Egmond aan Zee, The Netherlands
December 10, 2009

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