

COULD WOMEN REALLY DO A BETTER JOB?

BY SHANNON SELIN

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT HAS turned its sights on issues of international peace and security. In the United States, one finds a proliferation of groups with names such as Women for a Meaningful Summit, Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament, Mothers Embracing Nuclear Disarmament – even Grandmothers for Peace. In Canada, we have a recent report (this writer was the co-author) issued by the Canadian Centre for Arms Control and Disarmament bemoaning the sparse representation of women in the arms control field. At the latest meeting of the Consultative Group on Disarmament and Arms Control Affairs, the government congratulated itself on having increased the percentage of women participants, yet came under pressure to include even more.

What is this issue about? Like past feminist campaigns, is it primarily a drive to achieve equal representation and opportunities for women? No one can deny that foreign and defence policies are typically male-run. But while the question of numerical representation certainly plays a role, many arguments in favour of increasing women's voice in the nation's security policy, implicitly, if not explicitly, centre on the claim that women have something unique to offer to the policy process.

Women are peacemakers, some say, pointing to the high proportion of women in the peace movement and to public opinion polls which show a gender gap on peace and security questions. Women by nature (according to Australian doctor and lecturer Helen Caldicott, for example) or by nurture (see Norwegian peace researcher Birgit Brock-Utne) are less violent than men and less interested in the "toys" of war. Moreover, women have a "truer" vision of peace and security. For women, peace is far more than the absence of war. It is the absence of all violence and injustice. It is an end to the battering of women

and children. It is every human on the planet commanding a full belly, four walls and a roof, a doctor and a school.

Lurking not far beneath the surface of this claim is the notion that women, if only given the chance, could do things better. If women ran this world, they would save it. It's an attractive thought – that women could get together and abolish weapons and war, end poverty and hunger. "We can't do any worse than the men have done," is the cry. Well... in fact we could. We could blow ourselves up. Not that women are any more likely than men to trigger Armageddon. But in setting up a dichotomy between women/peace and men/war, these "moral mothers," as a friend calls them, make light of the security dilemmas that men have had to deal with, create false expectations about what women can do, and provoke a confrontation with men – and with other women.

IN MAKING BLANKET ASSERTIONS about women's nature, the moral mothers neglect a whole category of women who are working for peace and security outside of the peace movement framework. These are women in the Departments of External Affairs and National Defence, in arms control and defence-related research institutes, and in strategic studies and political science departments at universities. While some of these individuals may agree that women bring an intrinsically different approach to peace and security questions, many of them do not. They – and I would include myself in this category – find that they bring to the field much the

same perspective as do their male colleagues.

Of course they do, is the moral mother rejoinder. They have taken male-created strategic studies courses from male professors and are working in male-dominated institutions. Their true female perspective has been smothered under the weight of male baggage but, were this weight to be removed, they would no doubt see things as we, the moral mothers, do. The argument that one is the victim of a male socialization process is difficult to combat, and anyone who tries to do so is treated as a poor, deluded young thing or greeted with outright hostility. The moral mothers overlook, however, that women working in research or policy positions are typically students of international relations who have examined (and chosen to reject) alternative world paradigms, some – although propped up by men – that looked suspiciously like the women's perspective.

One has only to read Richard Falk – taking but one example – to recognize that women do not have a monopoly on notions of an underlying global harmony of interests, of security not based on military strength, of the need for redistribution of wealth. If the objective of the moral mothers is to insert more women into the peace and security field, by emphasizing the gender angle they alienate their greatest assets, namely those women already working in the field, who are proving to both men and women that women are capable researchers and analysts. The moral mothers do not gain my sympathy by insinuating that I am somehow less than female because I see merit in arms control as opposed to disarmament, perceive no easy end to arms races, take

comfort in the fact that the West deploys a military defence, and regard peace as the absence of war, rather than a broad mishmash of other things.

Nor do they make my task easier. Rather, they increase the likelihood that women, as they enter the field, will be sidelined into investigating "soft" topics such as peace education or the social consequences of increased military spending and shut out of "hard" discussions about missile accuracy, verification techniques, and the like. Granted that the moral mothers find technical discussions about war and peace issues inappropriate, but they should not allow their proclivities to restrict the options of all women in the field. There is an old boys' club in this business, and a major difficulty women have to overcome is male stereotypes about women's capabilities and interests when it comes to arms control and defence matters.

THE QUESTION OF WOMEN'S participation in the peace and security field is not a trifling one. There is only a handful of women professionals in the relevant divisions of the Departments of External Affairs and National Defence. In Ottawa, where I work, the non-government institutes are not much better; at the Canadian Centre for Arms Control and Disarmament and the Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security combined the number of women professionals is in the single digits. Seminar and conference speakers on security-related topics are almost uniformly male. The moral mothers are correct in bringing this gender imbalance to public attention. It is unfortunate that by focusing on women's supposedly unique view, the moral mothers obscure what should be the true issue, which is the right of women – regardless of ideological perspective – to have an equal say to men in issues that affect the future of us all. □