

PAPANDREOU

raising the consciousness of men and women

Margarita Papandreou is an internationally recognized feminist, author and peace advocate. She was born in the United States and now lives in Athens, Greece.

Papandreou is the international liaison of Women for a Meaningful Summit (WMS), a women's global peace network lobbying for the involvement of women in nuclear disarmament and the reallocation of funds from arms to development.

In its platform, WMS states, "We call for summit meetings at the highest level on the issue of Environment International Security. We call on governments to show a deep concern for the planet and the interlinked economic and ecological threats to its people. We call on citizens to accept the global challenge of survival and work together for new ways of thinking and new forms of behaviour."

WMS demands a summit between the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union on the protection of the environment, which involves the danger of nuclear war, and "developing harmony and cooperation among nations to deal with the questions of Environment and International Security."

For eight years, Papandreou was president of the Women's Union of Greece, an independent feminist organization that influenced legislative reforms such as the legalization of abortion, abolishing the dowry system, equal pay for women, the introduction of non-female-stereotyping text books in elementary schools, recognition of civil marriage, and allowing women to keep their own name after marriage and have equal rights over their children. Papandreou also wrote *Nightmare in Athens*, a critique of U.S. foreign policy in Greece.

Papandreou was at York recently to guest lecture called "The International Women's Movement." She is, and always has been, active in women's issues, nuclear disarmament, the peace movement and environmental protection.

Excalibur's Susan Vanstone spoke with Papandreou while she was at York.

Excalibur: How does the status of women in society compare between Greece and North America?

Papandreou: Greece is a more patriarchal society than the United States, but it's not the most patriarchal society, either. Eastern Europe, Italy and others are even more so. It's all a matter of degree. Discrimination is more intensified and more obvious in some places—there's subtle discrimination in all societies, but in some you can see it more than in others.

There are some things we've seen over the years and would like to see, as feminists. Scandinavian countries have had many improvements over the years, and all over there are many more women in public office, and then you have western countries in Europe, not quite the success of Scandinavian countries, but some are doing fairly well, maybe even better than the United States.

Excalibur: How are the traditional, patriarchal attitudes about women and their role in society changing?

Papandreou: The one thing that perhaps the decade of women and also the contemporary mass media have managed to do is to raise the awareness of the issues and consciousness of both men and women.

They have managed also, I think, to promote the legal status of women. The point is that knowing and having the awareness of the inequality does not mean necessarily that it has changed some of the patterns of the way men treat women. But, I think this is a very important first stage and it's a necessary first stage. And once the awareness is there, then the possibilities of changing behaviour is there. If there's no awareness, then you can't change behaviour. So you have a combination of better awareness and some laws that have improved the status of women.

In the meantime, we have issues that have come up such as working conditions and the need for development of policies in this area.

Excalibur: How were the 1980s as a decade for women?

Papandreou: Consciousness and awareness of women's issues were raised throughout the world. That's an important contribution, and there have been some results especially in the western world. Women have been able to move into male professions, more and more women have been able to go to school and education for women has slowly been considered more important in other parts of the world. There are some accomplishments, no doubt about that, but there's still a long way to go. It's the longest revolution.

Excalibur: What are the issues ahead for women in the 1990s?

Papandreou: I believe that we still have to look very carefully at the economic policies of the world and environmental issues that affect the quality of life. It's sometimes dangerous to talk about the problems of women in the 21st century because one of the things to look at is the [state] of the environment and the cultural milieu in which we live. And we forget that there's a very small percentage of women in the world who have advanced as much as we've advanced in the western world. There are women that are starving, there is malnutrition in the world, no opportunity to control the number of births in the family, and religious obstacles toward women being considered full human beings. There are all those things that have not really been dealt with particularly yet.

I think in the western world, in many cases it's opportunity for work or [the pursuit of] jobs that are not the lower level jobs within the community.

I would like to see the 21st century a century of leadership of women. I don't know whether we can accomplish that but if we don't, we're not going to make much headway on questions of disarmament, environmental destruction and so forth. We're going to continue in the patriarchal fashion, so we really have to continue to work on the development of an awareness of the fact that we live in a dominated society, not a partnership society.

Excalibur: What do you think about the recent neo-conservative shift of politics and its attributes such as religious fundamentalism and the possible reversal of the legality of abortion in the United States? How will this affect feminism?

Papandreou: I consider all these things to be bad developments. They're very dangerous, extremely dangerous and somewhat extremist. Polarization of ideologies is very bad. Extremism in general is bad for society. But I think what one can say is that it is an indication and a kind of mirror on the kind of societies that we've developed, that somehow people need to turn to dogmatism and extremist solutions. Are they looking for some kind of father figure to relieve them of the responsibility to work for things that they believe in and why is that?

Most of us in the older generation, when we found society not to our liking basically turned to working within a party structure, or working within a movement and then taking action on those things, not asking for some magic solution or some simple way. Is it a result of the consumer society, that people think you can just buy a product and it can solve all your problems? I don't know, but it was devastating also in terms of the trouble for women's society because religion has always put women at a lower level on the totem pole in terms of respect.

In Greece about a thousand years ago, there was a religious synod that tried to determine whether a woman was an animal or a human being. They voted on it, and women were human beings by one vote. But it shows that it wasn't very long ago that many people — men — were not

certain what kind of creatures women were. In Greece again, women didn't get the vote until 1952. So, it's fairly recent that these things have happened.

But I still think that it is unfortunate that women especially seek somehow the answers to the problems that they confront in society by going into a kind of a religious movement.

Excalibur: Will the women's movement survive this rightward shift in politics?

Papandreou: Yes, there's no way it will not survive. If women see some of the gains that have been made and if they see there's another force that is going to push women back, that sometimes gives a special surge to a movement. In some ways, that sometimes motivates people who have become somewhat apathetic. But I think the feminist movement is in a different phase, and it is much more a part of some important things. That includes things like women's studies, a lot of research, many more women writing and being published, more women getting into communications, which I consider very important. Women have not been seen as quite so active in demonstrations in the past years or so, but if an issue comes up which touches their human, basic rights then they'll come out on the streets, and the abortion issue shows that.

Excalibur: What will change as more women take political office and become political leaders?

Papandreou: There is a women's culture, sometimes subtle, sometimes not so subtle. Girls are brought up differently from boys. Women have somewhat different experiences and we have developed a set of values that can be attested to these experiences. I'll give an example. There's a women's group that studied and found out who the people are that make decisions on nuclear weapons. It's appalling that there are about 800 people in the world that determine what will be done in terms of development of nuclear weapons and disarmament. Of the 800, there were five women. If it were the reverse, and there were 795 women and five men making the decisions, we'd be moving much faster toward disarmament and the denuclearization of the world. I don't think you could find 795 women like Margaret Thatcher. I believe that in most women there is a feminist consciousness. If you search deeply enough, you'll find a feminist. I found that out when I was in the Soviet Union, where women are reluctant to accept anything that had to do with feminism, and reluctant to say things about the culture that are not consistent with the communist ideology. But if you were able to sit with them for a few days and let them take their hair down, you would find very often find a feminist orientation. You would find this in those 795 women, many who would be feminists who would be committed to changing the decision making.

Excalibur: Why would women make different decisions than men?

Papandreou: It's the way we've raised them. From the time that males started to dominate females and become the important element in society, they have guided services, and they've been trained somehow to be competitive. Men aren't aggressive because of genes. If that [were] the case, we [would] have a much larger task ahead of us to change men. I think we have injected this into the male to a great degree.

What I'm working for is a feminization of our society. If the society became more feminized, we would have less role positions to be taken, equality between the sexes, noncompetitive attitudes and a lack of aggression from male toward female. That's the basic pre-condition for a personal world.

I think women are slowly [starting] to believe that they're capable of leading a society, and that's a healthy development.

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