

Piecing it together: Feminism and Nonviolence

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Feminist Nonviolence

'I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men.' (Cesar Chavez, leader of the United Farm Workers Union in the US struggling for the rights of migrant workers, March 1968.)

Even allowing for the varieties of nonviolence and the different strands of feminism, it should be easy to see how they would blend well together. In both, liberation is of primary importance, along with belief in the strength of each individual, an abhorrence of domination and hierarchy, the reassertion of the importance of feelings, the openness to change ourselves and a concern for all forms of life. Clearly nonviolence would not be acceptable, as a principled position, to those feminists who believe that men will not, indeed cannot, change. Their vision of the future has no place for men, other than a very subservient one. Men would have to be held back from any positions they might abuse.

We believe, however, that the nonviolent society for which we are working would aspire not to be oppressive in any way. We accept that, despite difficulties, men have to be part of the solution if they are not to continue to be part of the problem. In the meantime we try not to let men drain the energy we have for other women and we work with men on our terms. Women have been men's source of inspiration, consolation and energy for thousands of years; we are due centuries of 'energy credit'.

Some of us in the group came to the peace movement through feminism, and some of us came to the women's liberation movement through the peace movement. Now we all find it hard to tease the two apart and allocate ideas to one or other source. However, there are points where our feminism comes into conflict with male-defined notions of nonviolence: the questions of women's invisibility as political activists, self-defence, abortion, holding onto the value of nurturing and de-escalating conflict without being seen as 'traditionally feminine'.

It is often argued that abortion is killing and thus not consistent with nonviolent ideas. As feminists we also look to the violence done to the woman who is made to have a child against her will, including, often, conception against her will. We look at the question in the context of male sexual domination, of death by backstreet abortionists, at the deaths of thousands of women . . . and there can be no doubt that we demand the woman's right to choose.

The well-spring of some of these differences is the fact that many of the revered nonviolent theorists have been men, whilst many of the practitioners have been women. Most of these men were members of an oppressed race - Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez - but they had one thing in their favour - being men. 'We know that however much they may think they are writing about experience, men are describing a

world they have seen through the eyes of the privileged. We are right to be cautious. We must not accept, even for a moment, male notions of what nonviolence is,' wrote the US feminist writer Andrea Dworkin.

So how is traditional nonviolence 'male-defined'? Firstly, by refusing to take women's oppression as seriously as other causes - uranium mining, Northern Ireland, racism, Third World, nuclear weapons, animal liberation - almost anything in the repertoire of respectable causes for political activists to embrace. None of these is greeted with the trivialisation and ridicule that can still greet feminism. The oppression of women can be regarded as the prime model, it's the one boys learn first. As Andrea Dworkin wrote: 'Any commitment to nonviolence which is real, which is authentic, must begin in the recognition of the forms and degrees of violence perpetrated against women by the gender class men. Any analysis of violence or commitment to act against it, that does not begin there is hollow, meaningless - a sham which will have as its direct consequence, the perpetuation of our servitude.'

We want to look at one of the problems arising from the male definition of nonviolence, one which has a bearing on the theoretical problem at the root of many of them - the importance of seeking out suffering.

'According to the science of Satyagraha (nonviolent resistance), the greater the repression and lawlessness on the part of authority, the greater should be the suffering courted by the victims. Success is the certain result of suffering of the extremest character voluntarily undergone.' (Letter from Gandhi to the Viceroy, 8/5/30)

'My personal trials have also taught me the value of unmerited suffering. As my suffering mounted I soon realised that there were two ways I could respond to my situation - either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course. Recognising the necessity of suffering, I have tried to make of it a virtue.' (Martin Luther King in *Strength to Love*)

This suffering had a deep religious significance and a spiritual value independent of any practical, worldly, tactical value. That apart, it was seen as a tool for use here and now. However it does not always work like that. The total number of person hours of suffering does not lead 'automatically' to an equivalent amount of success. Kampuchea and Chile would be heaven on earth by now if that were so. These men are talking about voluntary suffering, with the assumption that its value lies in its being sought - resulting in an extra, shocking and visible impact.

For women, however, physical and emotional suffering is rarely sought, it is already much more a part of mere existence. Women are battered, sexually abused, do 60 per cent of the world's work and own less than 10 per cent of the world's wealth. Thus women's suffering carries less of the visibility and moral virtue. The presence of women at Greenham Common peace camp has commonly resulted in media coverage concentrating on 'the family left to cope at home' whilst playing down the hardships of the women who camped out during one of England's harshest winters.

Moreover should we not be cautious of men telling us that suffering is a good thing? Would Gandhi have accepted that from the British or Martin Luther King from the whites? No, the point is that it is we alone who can decide how much we are prepared

to pay in each case for the cause in question. Emily Davison laid down her life for women's suffrage when she threw herself under the King's horse at the Derby in 1913, though it is not clear that this significantly furthered the cause. We too are prepared to suffer but we don't seek it out as something valuable in itself: to do so, we feel is a form of machismo.

Often the values and practice of nonviolence overlap with what could be called 'traditional female qualities', which isn't surprising since they are both outside the dominant culture that based on 'traditional male qualities'. The danger is that in confronting our conditioning we will discard much that is actually positive, simply because society ascribes it to women. In this way the methods and values of nonviolence, with its connotations of acquiescence and passivity, could be rejected too, since in patriarchal terms, they do not seem to be steps towards our liberation.

To continue to be concerned for the welfare of others, to refuse to use physical violence to get what we want - these may be 'traditional female qualities' and thus under scrutiny by the Women's Liberation Movement. We are still working towards an understanding of what we can make *our* definition. The understanding of nonviolence as activity rather than passivity does link with feminist efforts to encourage women to be more assertive.

Thus we feel that we are at the beginning of working out a definition, a theory and a practice of feminist nonviolence.